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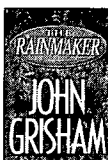
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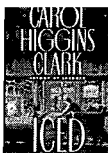
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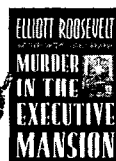
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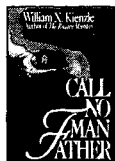
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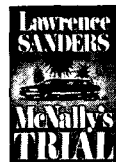
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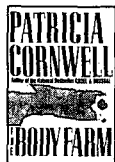
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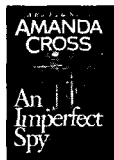
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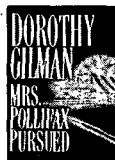
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ALFRED HITCHCOCK MYSTERY MAGAZINE Vol. 40, No. 10, October, 1995. Published every 28 days, which includes special issues in June and at year end, by Dell Magazines, Inc., \$2.50 per copy in the U.S.A. \$3.25 in Canada. Annual subscription \$34.97 in the U.S.A. and possessions; \$44.97 elsewhere (in Canada, GST is included) payable in advance in U.S. funds. Allow 6 to 8 weeks for change of address. Call 800-333-3311 with questions about your subscription. Editorial and Executive Offices, 1540 Broadway, N.Y., N.Y. 10036. Subscription orders and mail regarding subscriptions should be sent to P.O. Box 5124, Harlan, IA 51593-5124. Second class postage paid at New York, N.Y., and at additional mailing office. Canadian postage paid at Windsor, Ontario. Canada Post International Publications Mail, Product Sales Agreement No. 260665. © 1995 by Dell Magazines, Inc., all rights reserved. The stories in this magazine are all fictitious, and any resemblance between the characters in them and actual persons is completely coincidental. Protection secured under the Universal Copyright Convention. Reproduction or use without express permission of editorial or pictorial content in any manner is prohibited. All submissions must be accompanied by stamped self-addressed envelope; the Publisher assumes no responsibility for unsolicited manuscripts. POSTMASTER: Send Change of Address to Alfred Hitchcock Mystery Magazine, P.O. Box 5124, Harlan, IA 51593-5124. In Canada return to 3255 Wyandotte Street East, Windsor, Ontario, N8Y 1E9. GST #R123054108.

ISSN: 0002-5224. Printed in U.S.A.

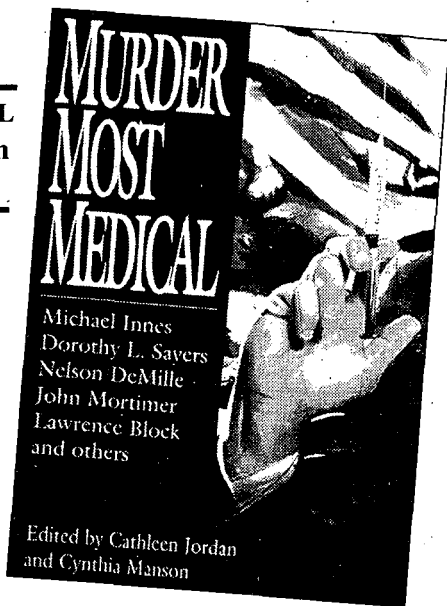
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EDITOR'S NOTES

by Cathleen Jordan

Tore Boeckmann, author of "The Cigar" and new to AHMM in this issue, lives in Bodo, Norway. That makes him our only author who lives north of the Arctic Circle.

But unknown to us, he made a trip south recently, to New York, where he dropped in on a panel discussion about short story writing hosted by the mystery bookstore Partners & Crime. AHMM senior assistant editor Susan Teitz, representing us on the panel, remarked to the audience of mostly aspiring writers that we do like unusual or exotic settings—the Venezuelan rain forest, for example, the setting for a story we had recently bought. When the audience was asked later if there were any *published* writers among them, a tall, blond stranger in the back raised his hand and said that he had been

published, that in fact he had written the story set in the Venezuelan rain forest.

Boy, was Susan surprised!

Not to mention delighted. "The Cigar" is one of her favorites.

It is also Mr. Boeckmann's first story to be published in English. More than two dozen of his mystery short stories have been published in Norwegian magazines since he took up writing full time in 1990; before that, he was a translator, a security guard, and a computer programmer and has run graphic design and publishing companies. He is also the author of "Conscious vs. Subconscious Motivation in Literature," an article in *The Intellectual Activist*.

Coincidentally, Linda M. Zelencik, our other new author in

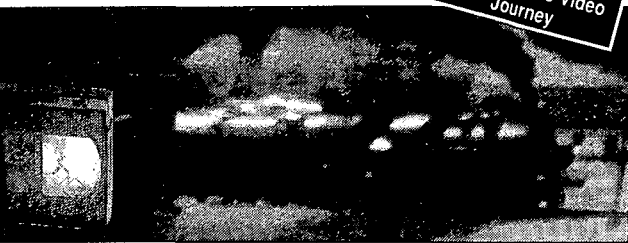
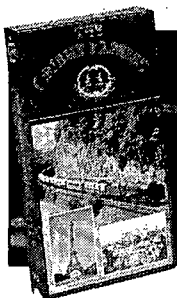
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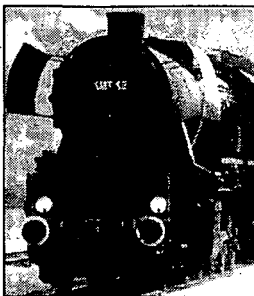
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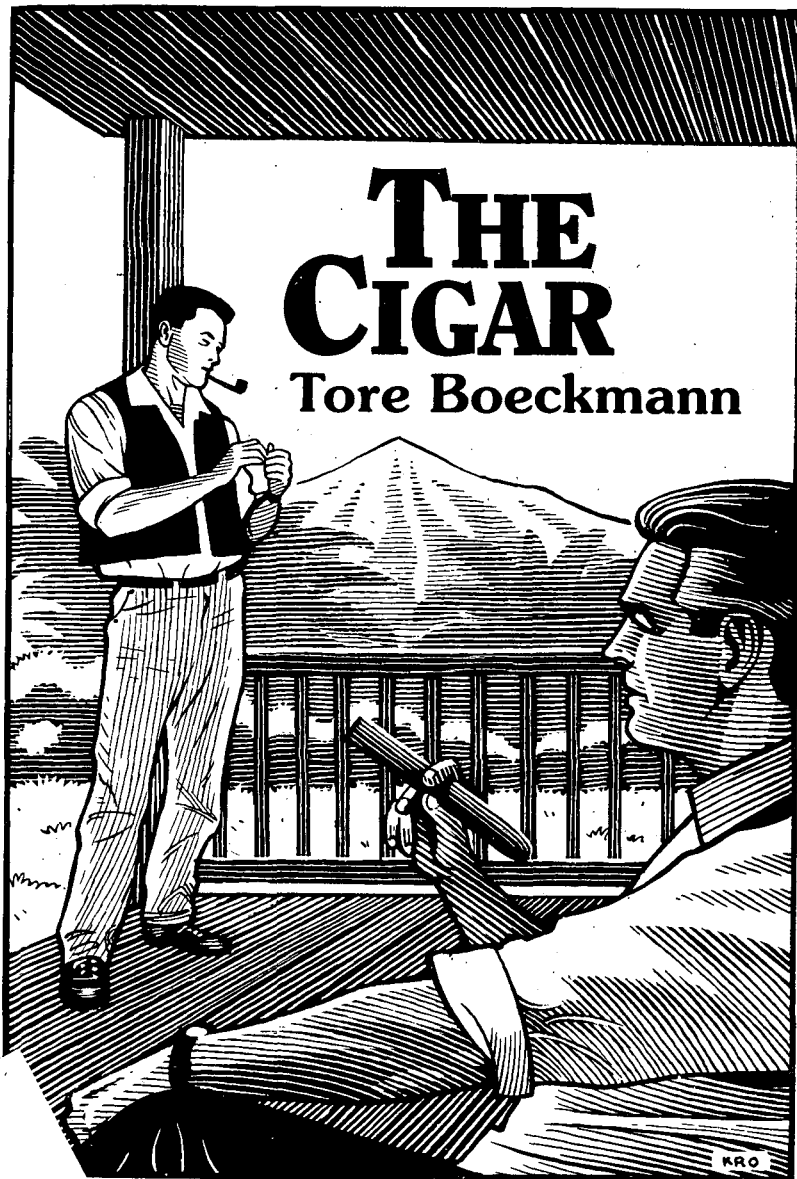
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FICTION

THE CIGAR

Tore Boeckmann



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I don't usually read the obituaries, but that morning, as I was leafing quickly through the back pages of the newspaper, my eye caught the headline WILLIAM SEWELL DIES, 68 YEARS OLD.

I glanced through the article. William Sewell, who had died Saturday at his mansion, was a major business tycoon. After serving on destroyers in the Atlantic during World War II, he had in the fifties built up a nationwide chain of department stores. His work on government commissions and his activities on behalf of prominent charities were described in detail. At the end came the interesting part:

Less known is Sewell's adventurous career as a diamond hunter in South America following the war. After years of unsuccessful struggle in the tropical forests of Venezuela, he and a companion found the famous Callao diamond, now owned by the king of Thailand. The find gave him the capital to start his business.

"Anyone you know?" my wife asked, worried.

"No, it's an old friend of Dad's," I said and handed her the paper. "But don't mention

it to him. Let him discover it for himself. They haven't been friends for years, and he doesn't like to talk about it."

After breakfast, I took the paper up to the second floor and left it as usual outside Dad's door. My father lives with us; or rather, we live on the first floor of his house, my wife and I and our two little girls.

My wife works part time, and she had dinner ready by the time I got home that evening.

"He hasn't come down," she said.

If Dad doesn't come down for dinner, it means that he wants to be left alone. Then I usually don't disturb him. But now I saw a chance to find out something I had been wondering about, so after dinner I went up to see if he wanted to talk.

I found Dad in his study. When Mother was alive, this room, an eclectic combination of English leather and Eastern bamboo furniture, was a sacred asylum from any touch of femininity and was Dad's regular retreat from the world. Firmly planted in his favorite high-backed armchair, he greeted me as I walked in.

"Ah. Good that you came up. Something to talk to you about. Sit down."

He leaned forward and picked a cigar, a Dominican Ma Haya, from a box on the table

before him. On the brass-topped surface of the table, beside the cigar box, lay the newspaper, open to the obituary page.

Dad removed the cigar band with his customary wince—he regards it as a vulgar affectation—then clipped the cigar and lighted it with loving care. Cigars are my father's passion. He can talk for hours about the pleasures of a good Havana, although he has had to do without them for thirty years because of the embargo. When an old acquaintance once offered him a contraband Montecristo, Dad physically threw him down the stairs.

When he had got the cigar burning, Dad thumped his finger against the newspaper.

"You've read this, of course. That's why you're here." He has a mind as sharp as the polished machetes on his wall.

I nodded.

"What do you know about it?"

"Only what I picked up as a kid. You and Sewell were together in the war; after it was over, you went to Venezuela together to dig for diamonds; and together you finally found a big one. As far as I know, you haven't had any contact since. I pieced this together from various sources, since you never wanted to talk about it."

"Very sensible of me. One mustn't live in the past. Can't stand those bores who spend their whole lives talking about what they did in the war."

"Anyway, you both made a bundle, and Sewell went on to become fabulously rich. It was assumed that he simply began to move in more refined circles."

"No, no. You mean Will cut me off because he didn't want to be reminded of his rugged past? Nothing like that. No, it was I who cut him off."

"Why?"

Dad moved his cigar slowly back and forth, making the silky zinc-blue column of fumes rise in lazy undulations toward the ceiling. He said, "Because I did him an injustice." He paused, then added, "I hope I did."

He looked at me as if he doubted my ability to understand what he was about to say. Then he drew deeply on the cigar and started to tell his story.

"What you've got to understand is that Will and I were *friends*. I know, I know; you've got friends, too; you play golf every Saturday. But what Will and I had was different. Maybe only war, or some equivalent, can create that kind of friendship between men. Anyway, we met in the navy, we spent three

years together there during the war, and in that time I saved his life and he saved mine, both more than once. When the war ended, I am sure that neither of us had ever loved a woman as much as each of us loved the other. This is what's impossible for young people to grasp because friendship is dead, like everything else."

My father agrees with the ancient Athenians that the world is going to pot.

He continued. "We were quite different. I was a romantic, an adventurer; Will was a hardheaded realist with a steely ambition to succeed. I never quite understood why he came with me to the forest, unless it was because he needed money and decided to gamble everything on one calculated throw of the dice. But we had one thing in common, the backbone of our friendship; we both knew that we could trust the other absolutely. Total, uncompromising honor and rectitude are very rare; it was a priceless commodity in the war, and the war was child's play compared to the forest. I am not beating my chest here because I betrayed that trust. I'll get to that.

"Anyway, we went to Venezuela thinking we would hit the jackpot in six months. It took us four years.

"The Venezuelan tropical forest was a treasure trove of diamonds, emeralds, and topazes, and back then the government was the most liberal in the world. Anyone who owned a pickax, a shovel, and a sieve could come and dig. Of course, the forest was also racked with malaria, yellow fever, snakes, and piranha-infested rivers, and the absence of law made it a magnet for thugs, escaped convicts, and unsavory characters in general. It was a rough place.

"And it was a hard place. We had four years of backbreaking work from sunrise to sunset, endless days digging dirt out of slimy holes in a mind-killing tropical heat, washing it again and again through the sieve, sometimes finding a paltry little stone of a carat or two—just enough to pay for the next couple of weeks' supplies.

"It wasn't very romantic, unless an endless stretch of relentless toil coupled with the constant possibility of being stabbed in the back or struck down by illness is your idea of romance. There were plenty of gems in the ground, and we found our share of them, but we didn't get rich and it wasn't worth it. But we couldn't leave.

"It became an obsession with us, as it became an obsession with every one of the thousands

of fortune hunters in the forest. Every so often, someone, somewhere, would find a big, flawless stone, and it would energize everyone else and we would all dig with twice the intensity for a couple of weeks. It was what we all thought about, hoped for, dreamt of. It was why we had come, and why we stayed.

"And after four years, on a day like every other, in a shovelful of dirt like every other, we found a two hundred carat flawless white diamond that would make headlines around the world and sell for three million dollars uncut.

"I discovered it. Will was sweating away in a dirt hole that covered him from view entirely. I was washing out the dirt with water from a little stream nearby. One moment, just another heap of dirt. The next moment, there it was in the bottom of the sieve. Not big at all, and not really much to look at in raw condition, but we were experts by then, and from the first glance I knew exactly what it was.

"My first thought was that if I stuck the diamond in my pocket, Will would never know. I have never blamed myself for thinking that. It was not a conclusion, it was not an intention, it was just a stray thought, and if we are to be held responsible

for every stray thought that flitters through our minds, we will all have to be locked up. I laughed at the idea, but the memory of it would prove disastrous.

"I shouted to Will, and when he climbed out of the hole, I showed him the diamond. We didn't shout from joy or leap from pleasure, we didn't embrace or dance around waving our arms. It was a solemn moment, not a festive one. William lit up a pipe and I a cigar. We had made it.

"The task now before us was to get the diamond safely back to civilization. There were buyers in the forest, but this was way beyond their league, and in fact it was too big even for the buyers in El Callao or Ciudad Bolívar. We had to get it to Caracas.

"We also had to keep our mouths shut. If knowledge of the find seeped out, it would be a certain death warrant for us both. But this was not a big problem. We were veterans of the forest and of late-night poker games, and we knew how to play a hand with four aces.

"Our first stop was a makeshift mining town a long day's walk to the south. A few months before, some really big stones had been found nearby, and two thousand men had descended upon the place from all

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over the forest. In fact, the town was already winding down, every square inch of dirt having been turned over twice. Will and I had left three weeks earlier.

"When we arrived, late in the morning on the second day after our big find, we rented a shack on the outskirts of town, having decided to keep a low profile. While I settled in, Will went to sell some two-bit stones and to buy new supplies. This would create the impression that we were staying in the forest.

"It was late afternoon by the time he came back. I was sitting in a deck chair on the cardboard porch, contemplating the fact that I could now spend the rest of my life sitting in a deck chair. Will had a big smile on his face and was holding his right hand behind his back.

"I told Lefanu it was your birthday,' he said. Lefanu was the biggest buyer in town, and also a dealer in guns and all kinds of expensive equipment. A short, fat Parisian, he was a former convict from the French penal colonies and was still fanatically crooked. In fact, I have always suspected him of stealing my wallet on our very first meeting, years before.

"My birthday is two months away,' I said.

"I know, but I needed an excuse for buying you this.' His hand came out from behind his back, and he extended to me the biggest cigar I had ever seen.

"Expertly made, with a high shine in the wrapper that marks quality. It was twelve inches long and nearly two inches thick—a ridiculous cigar, barely smokable, and just the right thing for the occasion. I burst out laughing.

"Lefanu sold you that monster?"

"A Don Quixote número uno."

"Well, that finally proves it—you can buy anything in the forest. You didn't buy one for yourself by any chance?"

"No, thank you, I'll stick to my pipe. Besides, watching you smoke this one is going to be a celebration in itself."

"I put the cigar on the railing in front of me, saving it for the evening. That conversation was the last unconstrained moment I ever had with Will.

"A short while later, he walked off to make some last arrangements concerning our purchases. I remained in my deck chair, feeling better than I had ever done in my life. I had made a fortune, I was finally leaving the forest, I was going to search out the most beautiful girl in the world and marry her,

and together we would have a grand time wasting most of my money. Will was going to invest his share in some business and build an empire. Funny the way some things work out exactly the way you plan them.

"And then Pedro came walking down the path and stopped hesitantly some distance away from our shack. Pedro, in his early twenties, was good-hearted, slow-witted, and gullible, and had a knack for losing all his money shooting craps. Once in his life he had been on a roll and had raked in more than ten thousand bolívars in a night, whereupon the game had turned nasty and two losing Brazilians had accused him of cheating. I had saved his life on that occasion, and thereafter he had sort of attached himself to me. He made his living running errands for Lefanu.

"He seemed reluctant to approach, which was unusual, so I waved him over. I tried to make some small talk, but he obviously had something else on his mind and was working his slow way towards it. He didn't look me in the eyes but had fixed his glance on the cigar on the railing. Finally I asked him, 'What's on your mind, Pedro? Is someone out to kill you again?'

"No. . . . No. Tell me, please, has anything happened with you and Señor Sewell?"

"Why, no, nothing out of the ordinary,' I said, trying to sound as unaffected as I could, my blood secretly chilling. Had word already gotten out? Had we somehow given ourselves away? If so, we were in mortal danger.

"You are not enemies, you and Señor Sewell?"

"Of course we're not enemies, Pedro. You know we're the best of friends. Why on earth do you ask that?"

"Because I was in the outer room today,' he blurted out, 'when Señor Sewell came out with that cigar in his hand. It was a Don Quixote *número uno*. Señor Lefanu got a box of them last month, with a shipment of guns directly from Cuba. I overheard him speak about it, it is a very big secret, he will kill me if he hears I have told. He will kill me if he hears I even know. Those cigars are exploding cigars.'

"Let me explain. The exploding cigar had been a favorite method of assassination in South America for years, and I do not mean the practical joker kind. What they would do is place a small charge of high explosive inside the cigar and attach a very short security fuse. One could smoke the cigar for a long time without noticing anything amiss, depending on the length of the fuse, but

sooner or later the glow would reach the fuse, the explosive would be set off, and the smoker would have his head blown off. Anyone standing close by would also be in great danger. The technology involved is simple, but the explosive naturally has to be put into the cigar at the place where it is rolled.

"The most famous case dated from the thirties, when the Brazilian soprano Theresa Lezana, a great cigar smoker, was given an exploding cigar by a jealous former lover and blew up in her dressing room during the intermission of a performance of *La Traviata*. In the sixties, there were rumors that the CIA had a plot to kill Castro in this manner. Damn shame they didn't go through with it; we could all have been smoking Havanas since then. Anyway, these cigars existed, and it was entirely credible that Lefanu was peddling them. It was not, however, credible that Will had bought one to give to me."

"So you didn't believe it?"

"I did not. I thanked Pedro for the warning, but told him I was convinced there was nothing in it. And I was. The whole thing was ridiculous. And yet... This guy was making accusations against Will Sewell, my best friend, and I was thanking him and sending him

on his way with a reassuring pat on the back. What I should have done is punch him. And I would have, had it happened a week before.

"I remained in the deck chair, trying to make some sense of the information I had. First, Pedro was not a liar, he was devoted to me, and he had no conceivable motive for cooking up a lie like that. He clearly believed what he had told me. Second, Will had a strong theoretical motive: a whole diamond is twice as much as half a diamond. True, he had often risked his own life in defense of mine, but he was ambitious, and an ambitious man may be ruthless without being a coward.

"I didn't believe it for a moment. I knew Will as well as I knew myself, and he was no murderer. It was not conceivable. Besides, Pedro wasn't the quickest mind in the forest, and even if he wasn't lying, he could very well have gotten it all wrong. I resolved to put the whole thing out of my mind and to smoke the cigar and enjoy it.

"What I would not do was mention the episode to Will. I was afraid that if I did I would give away the fact that for a moment I had actually considered the possibility that he was plotting to kill me. There could be no question of that.

"Will came back at sunset. He fetched a chair for himself, collected a heap of wet grass and set fire to it to chase away the mosquitoes, hung a carbide lamp from the roof of the porch and lit it, and settled himself next to me. We sat there staring at the stars in the black equatorial sky, Will smoking his pipe, neither of us saying much. This was normal between us, and I don't think Will noticed any strain in the silence.

"In my mind, I kept hearing my own voice saying the words, 'If I stick the diamond in my pocket, he will never know.' Wasn't that the first idea that had occurred to me, to cheat my best friend out of what was rightfully his? Could I complain if the same idea had occurred to him?

"I realized that the more I thought about it, the harder it was going to be to smoke the cigar. The doubt would feed on itself, like any emotion. The thing was to snap out of it and just do it. I started to reach for the cigar.

"'Aren't you going to smoke your cigar?'

"I drew back my hand. Had his voice been normal? Was there some unnatural undertone to it?

"'Soon. I feel a little strange in the stomach; it must be the

excitement.' It was the first lie I had ever told Will.

"We sat there until after midnight, Will smoking his pipe, one of us occasionally making some remark to start a conversation that somehow didn't quite take off. Then Will turned in, and I took the first watch. We were taking no chances, and until we reached Caracas, we would never both sleep at the same time. I had a loaded revolver next to me, and Will had one under his pillow.

"I sat there until morning, the cigar in front of me, the darkness full of strange and unusual shadows that never quite materialized. I was convinced I was turning paranoid.

"I did not smoke the cigar."

Dad paused. He looked down at his cigar in the ashtray. It was still glowing, a long tube of white ashes protruding from its tip.

"From the shantytown we had a five day journey on mules, by canoe, and by bus until we reached El Callao. We were always on watch, but nothing happened. In El Callao we had our first real bath in a year, which is why we dubbed the diamond 'the Callao.' It was Will's idea, and I passively agreed. We didn't speak much during that journey. Will must have noticed that something

don't think he had any idea what it was; he never mentioned the cigar and had probably forgotten all about it. The next day, we traveled on to Caracas, where we announced our find and made arrangements for the auction."

The room had darkened. The last rays of the sunset came in through the window, illuminating the swirling coils of smoke around us, glinting on the polished steel of the machetes on the wall. Dad was leaning out of his chair, staring ahead into a nonexistent distance. I imagined for a moment that I was seeing him then in the tropical forest, damp fog rising from the ground to hide the dangers lurking in the twilight beneath the leaves, his eyes watchfully darting after every unexpected sound. Suddenly the clanging of pipes echoed in the distance, bringing us back to reality; the girls were taking their evening bath.

"It's getting late," Dad said. "I'll be briefer."

He picked up his cigar and puffed at it to prevent it from going out, and he continued.

"When the diamond had been auctioned, we both moved back to the States. Our friendship didn't end all at once. But the old intimacy was gone, and every moment I spent with him was a reminder of my treason.

So I exploited every excuse to spend time by myself. I think Will was bewildered by this, but he didn't say anything. Soon I stopped seeing him altogether."

"Couldn't you just have cut the cigar open and checked it?" I said.

"Certainly not! Try to understand. The problem wasn't that I thought Will had tried to kill me; it was that I had not dared to smoke the cigar. Until I did, until I proved to myself that I trusted him, I had no business calling him my friend. The day I cut open the cigar, I would destroy the friendship forever. That would be an action that could not be taken back, and even if Will would never know it, I would. Sure, we could still see one another, we could still be acquaintances, but we could never again be the friends we once were. I wanted that friendship back. As long as I could still smoke the cigar, I could have it back whenever I chose. And I always meant to smoke it; I took good care of it and kept it ready to smoke at any moment; I just needed another day, or another week, or another month, to pluck up the courage.

"Two years after we had found the diamond, I married your mother. Will was not invited. He came to me the day

before the wedding and asked me what had happened to our friendship. I told him that four years in the forest had been too much, that I needed some time on my own. 'When you feel differently, give me a call,' he said and walked away. I can still remember the pain in his eyes.

"From time to time, years apart, he would call me and ask if I had changed my mind. I always answered no. And I always resolved to smoke the cigar that very evening. I would take it out, I would make all the preparations for the ritual, and I would sit there staring at it for hours before putting it away."

Dad rose, walked over to a small cabinet in a corner, and took out a long cedar wood box. He came back and sat down again, putting the box on the table beside William Sewell's obituary. He opened the lid. The cigar inside was exactly as described.

"I never did smoke it. The last time he called was two weeks ago. He sounded ill. The obituary says that he died of cancer; he must have known when he called that he was dying. He didn't mention it. And now he's dead."

"And you're telling me this because it doesn't matter any more?"

"I am telling you because it still matters. I am telling you because tomorrow I am going to smoke the cigar."

He pointed to the end of the obituary. "Will is going to be buried at two o'clock; I will smoke the cigar tomorrow morning at ten. It should take about three hours. I will redeem our friendship, and I will go to the funeral."

"If you survive."

"Look, I am sure the cigar is okay, as I have been all along. I just haven't had the courage to act accordingly. I have always put it off until tomorrow. Well, tomorrow is the last tomorrow. If I don't smoke the cigar and attend the funeral, the betrayal will be final."

"But you wouldn't be telling me if you were entirely certain?"

"I am as certain as anyone could be that Will was not a murderer. But with human beings anything is possible. The final verdict is pronounced only upon our death."

"So if you should be blown up tomorrow, I will know why?"

"Yes. And if you could contrive to drop by the house during lunch, I would be grateful. I wouldn't want the girls to come home from school and discover the remains of their grandfather."

"Very well. I suppose there is nothing I can say that will convince you not to go through with this?"

"Nothing at all," he said, and ground out the stub of his cigar in the ashtray. Then he rose and wished me a good night.

I could not concentrate on my work the next day, and at half past nine I told my secretary to cancel all my appointments. "Tell them I had to attend a funeral," I said.

I walked into Dad's study at five to ten. He was sitting in his chair, smelling faintly of aftershave, dressed in a dark blue suit with thin, widely spaced white stripes, so discreet they almost didn't exist. From the buttonhole of his left lapel stuck an unobtrusive white carnation.

"I'm not selling tickets," he said, but his tone was humorous.

"I'll wait downstairs. Somebody's got to stick around to scrape you off the walls."

"Yes, well, you obviously haven't come to cheer me up. No matter; I couldn't feel better. I am about to smoke my first Havana in thirty years."

The enormous cigar lay ready on the rim of the ashtray. The other accoutrements on the brass table were a small oil

lamp with a burning wick and a long splinter of cedar wood.

"Yes, by the way," I said, "how is it going to taste? It must be more than forty years old."

"What does it matter how it tastes? A Havana is a Havana—it's the principle of the thing. Stand back."

I stepped back to the doorway. Dad picked up the cigar with his left hand, and with his right he set fire to the splinter of cedar wood and carefully lighted the cigar. He threw the burnt piece of wood in the ashtray, stuck the cigar in his mouth, and drew on it. He seemed perfectly composed, at peace with himself, like a man who lights a cigar to enjoy a quiet hour of contemplation in his study.

"Okay," he said. "Go downstairs. I want to be alone. If anything happens, you'll hear it."

I went downstairs and started pacing the living room, my eyes glued to the hands of the big grandfather clock against the wall. They moved with incredible slowness. I sat down, then got up and started pacing again, then walked upstairs to my father's study.

He was sitting calmly in his armchair, the cigar in his hand, a huge cloud of bluish smoke around his head.

"What are you doing here again? I told you it could be dangerous."

"I must have inherited the family death wish," I said. "Actually, I just wanted to see if you were all right."

"Listen, a cigar should be enjoyed in solitude, or in the company of a relaxed and taciturn fellow smoker. What you don't want is to have nervously excited people running in and out. I appreciate your concern. Please exercise it somewhere else."

I walked downstairs, determined to relax. I sat down in a chair facing away from the grandfather clock. When I finally gave in to the urge to glance at my wristwatch and found that only seven minutes had passed, I angrily removed it and put it in my pocket. I stared out the window. The garden was empty and lifeless. Only a slight breeze stirring the leaves on the old chestnut indicated that there was still motion in the world.

The house was ominously silent, the only sound the rather irritating ticking of the clock behind me. I wondered if he had fallen asleep up there, and I quelled the urge to go and check.

There was something very strange about that ticking, but I couldn't figure out what it

was. I listened closely to it. It sounded perfectly all right, just the way an old grandfather clock should sound, just the way I remembered it from when I was a boy. Of course, that was it! I hadn't heard the clock tick since I was a boy. My mind had gotten so used to the sound that it had ceased to register it. I hadn't even noticed that I had stopped noticing, and now, for some reason, I was hearing it again.

I tried to block out the sound but couldn't. I got up and stopped the pendulum.

A little later, I felt an acute pain in my neck and noticed that I was tensing my muscles. I started consciously to relax them, one by one, and I had achieved an almost perfect state of limp relaxation when the sudden explosion shook the walls and a big piece of plaster from the ceiling fell on my head and burst into white powder.

I must have leapt from the chair and raced up the staircase, but the next thing I remember is throwing open the door to Dad's study and meeting a massive wall of thick black smoke. I could barely make out the immobile outline of Dad's body in his armchair, and I think I noticed that the cigar cabinet in the opposite corner of the room had been blown to pieces. Choking, I ran

to the window and broke the glass with a flowerpot.

"There is no need to break up the place," said Dad's voice, his figure slowly rising from the chair.

"You're alive!" I shouted and ran to him. The strong draft had begun clearing out the smoke and Dad's beaming, soot-marked face gradually became visible.

"Not by much," he said lightly. "I threw the cigar in the corner two seconds before it exploded."

"Why?"

"Because I finally figured it out. My God, I have been stupid! My mind must have been completely poisoned all these years." He sounded elated, and the words came out in a tumble, impatiently struggling against the necessity of sequence.

"Of course the cigar was explosive!" he said. "But Will had nothing to do with it. Lefanu gave him that cigar, knowing it would kill me and hoping it would kill us both. Then he could move in and take the diamond. The old coward! He must have been livid, waiting there

in the darkness that night, nothing happening."

"But how did he know about the diamond?"

"Of course he knew about it. That's what suddenly came to me. How did he know? Well, think. I told you yesterday. Thank God I told you the story—it refreshed my memory. I always thought that my treason to Will—my doubt—had kept me from smoking the cigar; what it really did was keep me from seeing the truth. Will bought me the biggest cigar ever made. Why do you buy someone a cigar like that? Why, as a celebration. What is there to celebrate in the forest? That you have found a big diamond."

"But Will told him it was your birthday."

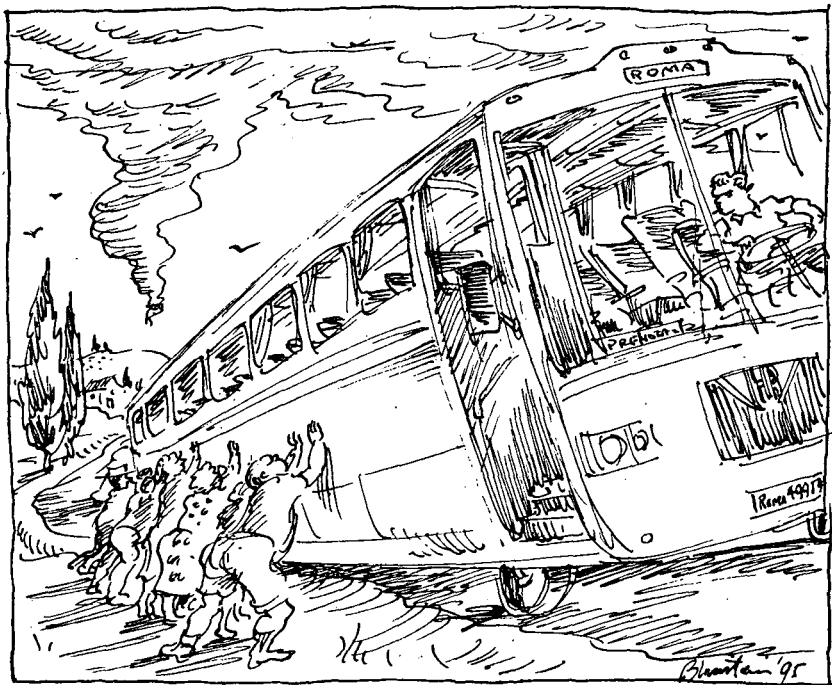
"Exactly. And the fact that he lied made Lefanu certain. Don't you see? Lefanu knew it wasn't my birthday—he had all my papers. I always knew he stole that wallet!"

He drew a deep breath.

"Do you have time on your hands?" he said. "I want you to go to a funeral with me—the funeral of the best friend I ever had."

UNDER THE WEATHER

K. D. Wentworth



Up in the Apennine foothills, the hot June morning smelled like lemon tea. Derek's head nodded as the tour bus droned around the curves, past neat rows of Chianti grape vineyards laid out over rocky ochre soil. The bordering twisted silver-green olive trees were older than the nation-state of Italia herself.

Heat waves shimmered up from the black asphalt as they flashed by an unfamiliar blue road sign emblazoned with a white lightning bolt. A low muttering erupted from Pietro, the driver. Derek lev-

ered himself out of the front seat and hunkered down next to the salt-and-pepper-haired Italian. "What's wrong?"

Pietro's molten brown eyes never wavered from the winding road. "I take wrong turn at Imperata. That sign say bad weather place ahead."

Derek glanced over his shoulder. Most of the silver and blue-gray heads behind him were slumped in their seats, napping after their six thirty A.M. start from Venice. "Then turn around."

Pietro's hand slapped wistfully at the cigarette pack in his breast pocket, then returned to the steering wheel. "You see place, you say!"

"How about over there?" He pointed at a flat turnout occupied by a dozen dilapidated cars and a variety of swaybacked cows and horses tethered to long ropes.

"Peasants." Pietro grimaced. "They come Wednesdays, sell horses, cows, goats. Very poor. No like tourists."

A few minutes later they passed a muddy, unpaved driveway lined with slim dark green cypresses and red terra-cotta planters. The villa had olive shutters, closed against the fierce midmorning sun, a tile roof faded to dull orange—and a layer of pristine white snow melting in the yard. Pietro glanced at it, then cursed under his breath and eased off the accelerator.

Derek's eyes widened. Snow, here—in midsummer? Impossible. It must have been a trick of the sunlight. He rubbed the knotted muscles between his eyes and tried to think. They had to make up the time they were losing; otherwise the restaurant in Rome would cancel their reservation, and he'd never get another one on such short notice that specialized in suave young waiters who knew just how to flirt with his elderly tourist ladies. He winced, seeing his end-of-the-tour gratuities melting like spumoni under the fierce Italian sun.

Pietro shifted into a lower gear as the narrow two-lane road dipped. Something white splatted on the windshield, and he turned on the wipers.

Derek leaned forward, shading his eyes. "That's not—"

Pietro crossed himself. "This way very bad." Before Derek could protest tour regulations, he stuck a cigarette in his mouth where it dangled unlit. "He very mean, all time do this to get attention, just like old days."

"Who?" Derek asked, but Pietro just clenched his jaw. The flakes were falling thick and heavy now—out of low gray clouds that had

appeared in the previously vacant blue sky. The elderly women sat up, and their voices rose like a flock of overwrought sparrows. He worried his lower lip between his teeth. It didn't do to get American ladies worked up; they were so bloody *excitable*. He thought of the unfortunate male pickpocket who had almost made off with Mr. Rickhart's wallet yesterday in the crowded Piazza San Marco in Venice. Five of the tour's fiercest whitehaired matrons, led by the indomitable Mrs. Jacobs, had attacked with their umbrellas and nearly beat the poor fellow into a bloody smear before Derek managed to intervene and avoid the Venice *polizie*.

"Mr. Allenby?" A manicured hand tapped his shoulder.

He turned around and met a sagging face, upon whose cheeks two bright red circles of blush looked as though they'd been stamped. "Can I be of some assistance, Mrs. Jacobs?"

She dimpled and flashed her false teeth. "Does it always snow like this here in the summer?"

"Not—" he swallowed hard "—often." The snow was blinding now, and the road was covered with ankle-high slush. Derek shivered, then reached for his microphone. "As you can see," his professionally polished voice boomed through the bus, "it's snowing at the moment. We're very fortunate to be viewing one of rarest phenomena of the Chianti region, the summer—blizzard."

A chorus of delighted ahhs echoed through the bus. Mr. Rickhart, an annoying retired insurance agent from Peoria, and one of only five men on the tour, immediately dug out his camera and elbowed his hopelessly bland wife aside to snap flash pictures out the window. Having warned him repeatedly that, since he was not using a high speed film with his rather ancient Kodak, photographs taken while the bus was in motion would most likely be blurred, Derek watched him with a sense of secret satisfaction.

"If you will all just stay in your seats," he continued, "we'll run out of this heavy weather in a moment or two." He switched the microphone off and leaned toward Pietro. "I can't believe it's snowing at this elevation in June."

A muscle jumped in Pietro's lean jaw. "Is very old problem in these hills. Peasants around here not Christian like good people in city, so *he* do whatever he want. Pope try fix many times. Never work. Now just put up sign to warn everyone."

The duncolored hills were terraced here, and the snowcovered retaining walls resembled an expensive Christmas card. Pietro eased around a hairpin curve and—the next second, without any

transition, they were driving into a howling rain that bent the tall thin cypress trees almost double and smashed the delicate yellow and white wildflowers into the muddy ground. Pietro cursed and switched the wipers to high.

Derek checked his watch and winced. Even if they turned around, they would have to go back through that snowstorm and lose even more time. He unfolded the map. "Let's just go on until we reach Busca and cut across to the highway."

Pietro's gray eyebrows arched. "No, this way much more bad weather!"

Derek lowered his voice. "May I remind you that these ladies have paid for an evening at Bergalia's Restaurant in Rome where they'll be alternately serenaded and lovingly pinched on the bottom by goodlooking young waiters as they expect when they come to Italy. They don't understand that no self-respecting Italian man actually behaves like that. If we don't get there by seven, we'll have to refund their money and eat at *McDonald's*."

Sweat glistened on Pietro's noble Italian forehead, but he nodded. Derek settled back in his seat as the bus plowed through a howling storm that would have done a hurricane credit. A leafy branch sailed past his window, followed by a black and white chicken, flapping its inadequate wings and looking terrified. Ahead, a stately cypress cracked and fell across their path.

Pietro jammed on the brakes. The bus slid slantways across the road, coming to rest a foot short of the tree. Pietro spat out the remains of the unlit cigarette he'd just bitten in half. "Come." He motioned to Derek. "We move tree."

"Great, just great!" Derek took a deep breath, then picked up the microphone. "We're having a spot of trouble," he said cheerfully, "but if you'll just remain seated, Pietro and I will take care of it."

Mr. Rickhart sprang to readiness like a third-string footballer called onto the field. His flash exploded incandescent white in Derek's face. Derek blinked furiously at the resulting dancing purple spots and gritted his teeth. "Mr. Rickhart, could you *please* not fire that thing in my eyes?" Arms extended, he fumbled out of the bus and followed Pietro into the raging storm.

Outside, Pietro had somehow managed to light a cigarette and was puffing furiously as the icy rain bucketed down. Looking like a drowned schnauzer, he jerked his chin at the tree. Derek inhaled

the bitter scent of wet cypress and climbed over the scaly brown trunk to where—

—a blast furnace sun blazed down from an endless turquoise sky, the temperature at least a hundred sweltering degrees. The black asphalt was not only dry, but so hot that his soft-soled shoes began to melt. On the other side of the springy green branches, the tip of Pietro's cigarette glowed red as he sheltered it from the driving rain.

"Pull!" Pietro yelled over the howl of the storm.

Derek nodded and put his back into it. Sweat ran down his temples and soaked his collar as he grunted and strained. The tree grudgingly slid around until it paralleled the road. Derek stood at the bizarre dividing line between hurricane and torrid sun and thrust his arm through. On the other side, the force of the rain beat his arm down.

Pietro dashed back into the bus. Derek lowered his head and followed, immediately drenched again and shivering. As soon as he got on, the bus surged forward into the heat wave. "As you can see," Derek said breathlessly into the microphone, "the weather in this part of Italy is rather changeable."

Pietro switched the air conditioning back on. The air steamed off the scalding road surface in waves, giving everything a hazy look. Against tour regulations, Mr. Rickhart opened his window and hung out, snapping still more pictures. In the fields, a few scraggly, exhausted-looking goats grazed, their eyes white-rimmed and jumpy. Dusky gray lizards with beady black eyes sunned themselves on the rock walls and watched the bus rumble past.

"Pietro . . ." Derek mopped at his hair with a handkerchief. "Just what did that blue sign with the lightning bolt mean?"

Pietro's olive-dark face grimaced. "Mean weather *instabile*, change all time."

"Unstable?" Derek spread his soaked windbreaker over the back of the seat to dry. "Why?"

"I grow up not far from here. My grandmother say this problem go back to old Romans and Father Jupiter." Pietro gave a melodramatic sigh and relaxed into the seat, his hair curling damply above his collar. "He god of thunder, rain, cloud, lightning, all kind weather. He not like pope, so he make much trouble in place like this where peasants still remember him."

Father Jupiter? Derek opened his mouth to protest as a small white pellet ricocheted off the windshield. Then another. And an-

other. Pietro's upper lip curled as he leaned forward and clutched the steering wheel. Outside, white marbles were bouncing on the road and in the grass.

The bus fishtailed, and Pietro spun the wheel backwards to control the skid. "*Mama mia!*" He upended the cigarette pack in his lap and thrust another unlit cylinder into his mouth.

"Mr. Allenby?" Mrs. Walinski's buzz-saw voice called from the back. "Does it hail much in these parts?"

His fingers tightened on the microphone, then switched it on. "Only in the summer," he said firmly, making it up as he went along. "In the winter, of course, it's far too cold at this altitude for true hail."

The grass was littered with white hailstones now, and they were piling up on the road like slushy gravel. Pietro geared down again, chewing his cigarette.

"But, Mr. Allenby," Mrs. Walinski whined, "just a few minutes ago, the temperature was positively broiling. How does hail form under these conditions?"

With great *difficulty*, Derek thought savagely, then forced his lips into his best professional smile. "It's an idiosyncrasy of local conditions, downdrafts, inverted fronts, and all that." He leaned forward and studied the road. This was too weird. Surely they were going to run out of it soon. The hail did seem to be subsiding. All that was falling now was a thin drizzle of . . . sleet.

Pietro snarled and shifted into second just as the rear end of the bus swept to the right and into a steep ditch. A chorus of screams rose from behind Derek, followed by an ominous thump.

"Oh my God!" Mrs. Rickhart cried. "Harold's hit his head!"

And perhaps his camera, Derek couldn't help hoping as he scrambled to his feet. He held up his hands, palms out. "Please stay calm, ladies and gentlemen. I will take care of Mr. Rickhart while Pietro—" he jerked his chin at the Italian "—sees what needs to be done about the bus." He grabbed the first aid kit from under his seat and pushed down the slanting aisle to where Mr. Rickhart sprawled out the window, mouth open, eyes blinking bewilderedly, a purpling knot on his temple.

Derek grabbed his belt and eased the potbellied old man back into his seat. Mrs. Rickhart hovered at his shoulder, fussing at her beehive hairdo and getting in the way. Derek sighed and, after peering into Mr. Rickhart's equally reactive myopic pupils, decided there was no major damage. He stuck his handkerchief out the

window to soak it in the freezing rain, then handed it to the teary-eyed wife. "Press this to his head, Mrs. Rickhart. He should be fine."

She dabbed at her bleeding mascara with the icy cloth, then turned to her husband with clenched fists. "Harold, I told you to sit down!"

Derek levered his way back up the leaning aisle to confer with Pietro. The tall, lean Italian was standing in the open doorway, hands tucked under his armpits, watching the sleet glaze the telephone wires.

"Well?" Derek peered over his shoulder and shivered.

Pietro combed his fingers back through his soggy hair. "We need tow truck."

Derek sagged against the cool vinyl of the driver's seat. "How long will that take?"

"Two, maybe three hours." Pietro gestured to the east. "Truck come from Bologna."

Derek's head whirled. He had never been off schedule more than thirty minutes the entire fourteen years he'd worked for Mobius Tours. The home office was never going to understand.

"We passed a villa a little while ago," he said weakly. "I'll hike back and ask them to call for the truck and notify the Rome office that we're unavoidably detained." He reached for his damp windbreaker. "You make sure everyone stays on the bus. *Capisce?*"

Pietro was rummaging under his seat for loose cigarettes, his dark face unreadable. "*Sì.*"

Derek folded his collar up and shoved his hands in the pockets. Outside, the sleet had transformed the Apennine foothills into a winter fantasy; every tiny wildflower, every piece of gravel, every bright-eyed sparrow gleamed under an exotic layer of shimmering ice. With his first slithering step onto the treacherous stuff, Derek could tell his shoes were not meant for this. He fell three times before he reached the back of the bus. After the third try, he stayed on all fours and crawled toward the shimmering dry pavement he could see a few yards away.

He crossed the invisible weather line and burned his palm on the broiling pavement. Swearing, he recoiled and lurched to his feet, breathing heavily. In another ten feet, the stiflingly hot air dissolved into fog, gray as a mouse's fur and twice as thick. Unable to see three inches ahead of his nose, he edged forward, arms out as though he were playing blind man's bluff. Beneath his shoes,

the road's smooth surface gave way suddenly to rocks and stringy grass. He tried to retrace his steps but got more lost every second, tripping over invisible shrubs and bouncing off the shaggy trunks of towering umbrella pines and, once, a smelly, rather unfriendly goat.

His fingers were scraped and his feet aching when the fog faded to wispy tatters and he saw the hills stretching out before him, blue and misty in the distance. He was standing at the edge of a terraced vineyard with long strings of grapevines leading back up the grade. At the top, he could see the remains of several white columns, severely weathered, and a half buried sweep of marble steps. The breeze blew against his face, warm but not broiling, and certainly not damp any more. He peeled out of his windbreaker, confident he had reached the edge of the unstable weather zone. Now, if he could just find his way to a telephone . . .

Lightning cracked overhead, crooked as an angry snake. The flat, burnt-iron smell of ozone filled the air, and a deep male laugh rumbled across the hills. Derek shaded his face with his hand, but he couldn't see anyone. Lightning flashed again, this time blasting an olive tree at the foot of the hill into smoking splinters. Every hair on his body crackled with electricity. He swore and sprinted in the opposite direction toward the crest where the ruined columns and a flanking line of tall slim cypresses stood like sentinels.

The columns were part of an ancient temple, he realized as he pounded up the hill. A statue of an immense, half naked god with an eagle perched on its shoulder had fallen on its side. He made out a faint *I* on the base, followed by what looked like a *V*. Just as he panted up to the top, it occurred belatedly to him that, during a lightning storm, he should perhaps avoid tall—

Something *whumped*. A giant's fist smacked him in the ribs. He flailed his arms as the ground jumped up and attacked him from behind.

Lying on his back, Derek saw a soaring eagle staring down at him with wicked, laughing eyes. It screeched, then swooped down to land on the ground beside his face. "Not doing so well today, are we?" It preened its tailfeathers energetically.

Derek felt like a truck had run over his head, perhaps as many as a dozen times. He blinked bewilderedly up at the cruel, curved beak. "Wha—"

"A bit of tribute would come in ever so handy at the moment," the eagle said plaintively. "You know, a drop of wine, some female companionship, the well-upholstered sort, of course, maybe a nice fresh hotblooded dove for sacrifice, and I could be persuaded to let you go on your merry little way."

"I—" Derek's mouth didn't seem to be in working order. He struggled to speak. "Who—"

The eagle cocked its head and regarded him with one golden, knowing eye. It winked. "Hey, you want to do business around here, sonny, you've got to play my game."

"What—game?"

The eagle drew itself up, apparently affronted. "The oldest game around. You know, prayer, supplication, greasing the wheels that make the world run, so to speak." It clacked its beak. "So, how about it?"

"I don't—" Derek strained as the eagle's body dissolved into white static and faded from view. He realized suddenly that his eyes were still closed.

Somewhere close by, young voices rose and fell excitedly as he felt hands dig through his pockets. His head rang as though someone were using it for a bell in one of the big cathedrals, and his teeth buzzed. He pulled himself together and groaned.

The voices stopped, then the hands rolled him over and slapped at his back pockets. He peeled open his eyes and wished he hadn't. The sun's cheerful yellow rays pierced him right to the brain, and he thought the back of his head was going to explode. A large-eyed boy and girl stared down at him, their thin faces smudged. Derek tried to speak, but his tongue was too numb to form words.

The boy nudged the girl with his elbow and they scampered off, their laughter echoing across the hillsides.

Derek sat up, then clutched his head against the pounding pain centered behind his forehead. A few feet away, the toothpick-remains of a blasted cypress still smoked. The fallen statue of the god seemed to sneer at him. How long had he been out? He glanced at his wrist, but apparently his watch had departed with the children.

He wobbled to his feet and set off after them. Perhaps their parents would have a telephone, although he couldn't pay for it now. Well, he would just tell them to consider what the children had stolen as a prepayment.

Lightning cracked in the distance, and he cringed. He shuddered and forced his feet to shamble faster. At the top of the fourth hill, he saw the urchins enter the same flat turnout crowded with battered cars and animals they had passed earlier.

He headed downwards. Most of the cars were beat-up relics; some were missing roofs, others hoods or doors. Skinny horses with their heads lowered to the ground were interspersed with anxious, starved-looking chickens, goats, and wary whip-thin mongrel dogs, several of which met Derek at the outskirts and salivated on his socks.

A dark-faced man with a thin mustache drifted into view. He carried a long knobby stick.

"Buon giorno!" Derek cried with false heartiness.

A dozen more hatchet-faced men appeared behind the first, who merely tapped the stick against his palm, his narrowed eyes black as a well at midnight.

Derek made dialing motions with his hands. *"Telefono?"*

The men surrounded him, arms crossed over their chests, their high-cheekboned faces impassive. Without warning, rain began to sheet down like Noah's flood.

"Never mind," Derek mumbled and turned to flee. The two nearest caught his arms and hustled him into the ragtag circle. "This really isn't necessary," he protested.

Just as they reached the first moldering car, the rain ceased as though they had passed some magical dividing line. He glanced over his shoulder and saw the water still cascading down, but within the uneven circle of cars, it was dry as the proverbial bone. He was wide-eyed as they dragged him into the center and threw him at the feet of a scowling, fat old man seated in a rickety lawn chair. He smiled in a nasty way. "Hello, English. You want buy horse?"

Derek swallowed hard. "Uh, no, thank you." The air reeked of ripening garbage and unenclosed privies. The attending flies were as thick as pea soup, and positively joyous. A few women dressed in faded skirts and fringed shawls looked on in obvious sloe-eyed amusement. On a grassless patch of ochre earth, a muttering, toothless old woman laid out a deck of oversized cards in a precise pattern.

The old man held up Derek's passport, then eyed him with obvious disdain. "So, you go temple?" His nose was as thin as a knife and looked as if it had been sledge-hammered in several places.

"Not so smart. Father Jupiter, he very strong." He gestured at the old woman. "Only my Aunt Amaretta stop his power."

"Actually, I'm looking for a telephone." Derek's pants squished as he struggled onto his sodden knees. He raised his eyebrows. "You understand—*telefono*?"

The old man's lips curled into a thin feral smile. "*Telefono* need lire."

"Ah yes, well . . ." Derek slapped his empty pockets. "I don't seem to have any at the moment." He spotted the grinning urchins who had robbed him. "I, uh, gave it all to charity."

The man's cheeks crinkled until his oily black eyes nearly disappeared. "Charity, yes, we like her very much." He dug through Derek's wallet and pulled out his red-bordered Mobius Tours identification card. "How many on bus?"

Derek paled. "Eighty-two, all men—and the driver has a gun."

"Good." The old man slipped a long knife from a sheath in his boot and turned it so that the sunlight danced along its polished edge. "Gun, she bring much lire." He motioned at the surrounding men. "We go bus now."

One of the younger men helped the old woman to her feet. She left the cards spread out on the ground but slid another deck into her pocket.

The peasants threw Derek into a fenderless four-seat Fiat that amazingly held ten if they sat in layers. Unerringly, they turned in the right direction and drove straight toward the stranded bus. Squashed on the bottom beneath two unwashed bruisers, Derek was flailing weakly for air when the first chill raindrop caught him in the eye.

A second later, the rain fell in earnest and Derek heard a grumbling, roaring sound, like a gigantic locomotive was bearing down on them. In the front seat, the old woman shook her fist at the roiling black clouds, then sorted through the deck of cards. He heard laughter again, low and rumbling. The driver flattened the accelerator, and the Fiat leaped forward, screeching around the hilly curves at such a reckless rate that Derek expected to land upside down in one of the vineyards any second.

They rounded a final turn and saw the red and white Mobius bus still mired in the ditch. The ice had melted, though the rain continued to pelt down. The sky had a strange greenish cast.

Derek struggled to think. Unfortunately, Pietro did not have a gun, and he was painfully aware that Mobius Tours would never

understand if he allowed his forty-one elderly retired stockbrokers, teachers, insurance agents, and Mary Kay salesladies to be robbed by a bunch of no-good, unwashed thieving peasants.

The train sound was louder now, and the driver squinted nervously at the sky as they piled out of the Fiat. The old woman knelt on the ground and hurriedly dealt her cards as Derek was hauled to his feet. They were Tarot cards, he realized. Was the old hag going to tell their fortunes after they finished robbing everyone?

Pietro met him at the bus's door, a smoking cigarette dangling from the corner of his mouth. He eyed the men skeptically. "This tow truck?"

"Not—" Derek gasped as a knife pricked his back. "Not exactly."

The old man's whiskery lips pressed against his ear. "You tell people bring cameras and jewelry and lire, or I cut your liver out and take to *him*." He pointed at the sky, then twisted the knife. A warm trickle of blood seeped down Derek's back.

Derek flinched. "Yes, all right!"

The old woman placed a final brightly colored card on the ground and leaned back, apparently satisfied. The train sound faded, and the rain dribbled away.

Derek's hand trembled as he pushed his wet hair back out of his eyes. "Hand me the microphone, Pietro."

Pietro, his brown eyes narrowed, did as Derek asked.

"Ladies and gentlemen." Derek couldn't keep a quaver out of his voice. "Mobius Tours very much regrets this unfortunate delay. I have sent for a tow truck, which should be here momentarily. In the meantime—" His mind whirled, trying to think of some way out of this mess. "For your own safety, please step outside and bring all your personal belongings, including your cameras and umbrellas."

Skittish as a wet cat, Pietro stood at the bottom of the steps and handed the ladies down. When Mr. Rickhart stepped out, camera in hand, Derek nodded to him nervously. "Why don't you snap a photo of these quaint country lads?"

Before the thieves could react, Mr. Rickhart raised his everpresent camera and pressed the shutter. The flash went off in a blinding burst of light. The men jerked back, scrunching their eyes closed. "Be careful, ladies!" Derek cried. "These fellows are notorious pickpockets!" He dropped to the ground and buried his head in his arms.

"Pickpockets!" Mrs. Jacobs squealed. She charged, wielding her umbrella with a single-minded ferocity so precise that Derek was sure it must be taught in American geriatric recreation centers. The other ladies, thirty-five strong, were instantly at her Keds' heels, laying about with their umbrellas and red Mobius Tours shoulder bags stuffed with Mary Kay jars until not a thief was left standing.

Pietro cocked an eyebrow, then bent to dig through the nearest sprawled peasant's pockets for a cigarette.

Derek clambered to his feet, his hands shaking. "Is everyone all right?" He hurriedly counted gray heads. "Uh, Pietro, get their knives," he said, "and guns, if they have any—and my wallet and passport."

"Gee," Mrs. Jacobs said, "what a funny place to play cards."

Derek glanced down and saw the old woman hurriedly picking up her Tarot cards. The wind gusted and a few spatters of icy rain hit him in the face. He suddenly remembered the pouring rain stopping just short of the peasants' gathering. The cards had been laid out the same way there, too. "Stop her!" he said. "Those cards are holding off the weather!"

Pietro snarled and grabbed the crone's spindly arm, demanding something in Italian. She just cackled and kicked the rest of the pattern apart. The rumbling train sound came back. The dazed thieves raised their heads from the cold mud to look at the sky, blanched, then wavered to their feet and tottered back to their Fiat.

Mrs. Rickhart pointed at the sky. "My God! It's a tornado!"

The wind increased, pelting them with leaves and branches and tiny moist frogs. "Come!" Pietro released the old woman and turned to Derek. "Ice gone now. You push bus hard. I drive out ditch!"

The old woman hobbled over to the waiting Fiat and sat on the top layer of men. The car spun its threadbare tires, then sped down the road headed east, away from the wind. Derek hesitated, trying to remember his civil defense classes. "But isn't it dangerous to drive in a tornado? Shouldn't we hide in a cellar?"

Pietro's expressive eyebrows rose. "You see cellar?"

Derek glanced over his shoulder. A twisting, turning column of gray was dangling out of the storm clouds and winding their way. His heartbeat shifted into a higher, more painful tempo. "All right!" he shouted above the roar of the wind. "Come on, everybody, push!"

Pietro scrambled into the driver's seat; the forty-one tourists braced their age-spotted, arthritic hands on the back of the bus and

shoved. The wheels spun in the mud as Pietro eased the accelerator down. Beside Derek, Mrs. Jacobs grunted, sweat beading on her wrinkled brow, then the bus surged forward, the wheels gaining purchase on the wet macadam. Derek slipped and fell nose-down in the mud.

Mr. Rickhart snagged his arm and jerked him up. "Come on, Allenby, move it!" Together, they stumbled to the front of the bus where the others were crowding on.

The tornado was so close now he could feel it sucking at his clothes, his teeth, even the air in his chest. The roar was deafening as Mr. Rickhart crammed the last old lady up the steps and shoved in behind her.

Derek leaped onto the lowest step. "Go, Pietro!"

The driver threw the bus into gear and jammed down the accelerator. The bus lurched forward and around the first curve. Mr. Rickhart fought his way to the rear and knelt on the floor, snapping flash pictures out the back window. Derek looped one arm around a rail and fished his microphone off the floor. "If you will all just take your seats, I'm sure Pietro will have us out of danger in a moment or two."

The tornado ground closer and closer, ripping at the countryside as it went. Derek could see whole trees, a red-tiled roof, and several surprised-looking cows whirling inside the spinning gray column. It closed in, blotting out everything with its dark maelstrom. He had the strange impression that two blazing golden eyes were staring out at them. He couldn't breathe, couldn't move so much as a finger.

The twister wavered, hopped in place like a rebuked child, then disappeared back into the low hanging black clouds.

A cheer went up from the muddy tourists. Derek sagged weakly to the floor, the microphone cord tangled around his neck. "I don't understand. What happened?"

Pietro motioned with his chin to the left and Derek saw the back of a blue road sign emblazoned with a white lightning bolt.

"We go Rome now." Pietro flashed him a thumbs-up. "Eat big dinner."

Trembling, Derek hauled himself into his seat and leaned his aching head back. "But we'll be too late for our reservation," he mumbled. Across the aisle, Mrs. Jacobs and Mrs. Rickhart had apparently rescued the Tarot deck from the mud and were experimenting with different patterns. He shuddered.

"Is no problem." Pietro looked in the rear view mirror to comb his hair while steering the bus with his knees. "I stop, call uncle. My aunt, she cook much food for us, and I have many fine cousins, all goodlooking like me." He squared his shoulders. "They work at hotels all over Rome, very smart. You pay plenty lire, they pinch American bottoms good."

"But it has to be done just right." Derek's eyelids sagged. "Not too hard and in just the right place with proper reverence, and the brochure said there would be dancing." His eyelids snapped open. "Pietro, can they dance?"

"*Mama mia!*" Pietro's brown gaze smoldered. "This Italia! They dance very much damn good!"

How silly of him. Derek's eyes drifted shut again. Pietro was right—this *was* Italia.

Unlike the weather, some things you could count on.

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FICTION

BUMP IN THE NIGHT

Jas. R. Petrin

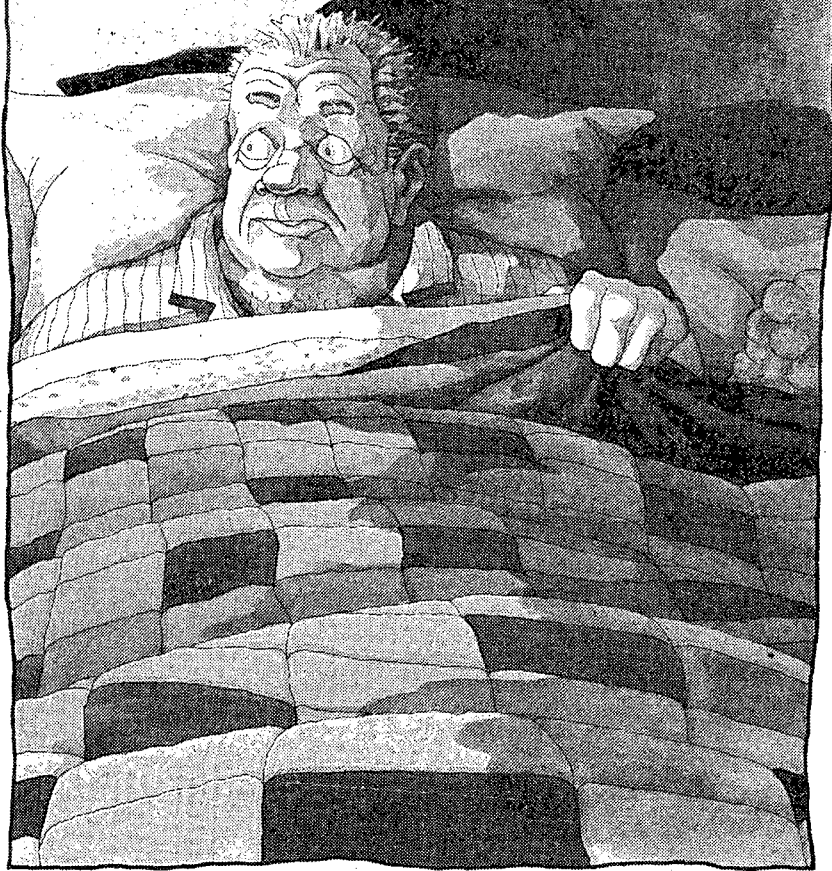


Illustration by Jim Adams

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"But we got *crime* in this town! *Tons* of crime in this town!"

Mrs. Robideau went to the window and angrily waved her hand at the empty street. "Just look! Crime all over the place. What the heck are they talking about—a ten day police station layoff?"

Chief Robideau sat gloomily munching a chocolate chip cookie.

"It's a cost-cutting measure. The town's credit rating slipped, and if the council don't cut back expenses, then next year they say our cost of borrowing's going to go up."

"Who says so? Who says that completely dumb thing?"

"The town council said it. Isn't that good enough for you?"

"That town council? *Our* town council? Please! The day I believe anything *that* town council says there'll be a blue moon at noon, I can tell you. That's the day pigs will fly."

"Well," Robideau said, taking a sip of his coffee and setting it back down again with a grimace because it was cold, "you'd better believe this much because it's the truth. Ten days in the park. And they start docking checks the first pay period next month."

"What about all the rest of them?"

"The rest of who?"

"All the rest of the town workers. Are they getting ten days in the park, too?"

"Sure they are. We all are. Except, of course, for the mayor and the council—"

"Aha!"

"They say they're too busy, but they've promised to take the pay cut anyway. Ten days works out to a three point eight percent cut is what they said."

"That bunch take a cut? The same cut as everyone else? I'll believe that," Mrs. Robideau told him, "when I see it. When I have their pay stubs examined by the FBI."

"Well, you won't see their pay stubs, you'll only see mine."

"I'd rather see the money. And when is your first day off, by the way?"

Robideau brushed cookie crumbs off his shirt. "First one's tomorrow."

"And if you change your mind?"

"Can't. It's scheduled."

"Flying pigs," Mrs. Robideau said crossly, "zooming all over the sky. Then talk to me about *that* town council!"

When the explosion rocked the town, it was thirteen minutes past two. Robideau knew that because he was lying awake in bed doing mental calculations, working out how the pay cut would affect his retire-

ment. The way he figured it, if his pension was based on fifty-eight percent of his gross earnings for the best three of his final six years, and if inflation kept running at two point three percent, and now he took this three point eight percent kick in the wallet, then, let's see, that would mean . . .

BOOM!

The bed jumped, the house jumped, the ground under the town jumped, and the sky outside lit up as if a truckload of Chinese fireworks had just crashed through the Robideau's front gate. An iridescent print of the bedroom window floated before the chief's astonished eyes as the clock blinked silently on to two fourteen.

His first thought was that it must have been some freak bolt of lightning, the day having been muggy and warm with huge cumulus clouds standing over the town. But thunder rumbled and tumbled, and this had been a single, loud blast. He sat up and reached for his pants.

"Whussamatter . . ." Mrs. Robideau murmured.

"I don't know. I better go see."

"Stayansnuggle . . ."

"Can't. Something just blew up out there."

"What did?"

"How do I know? That's what I've got to find out."

"But it's your day off."

"So what?"

"You won't get paid."

"I can't help that."

Mrs. Robideau burrowed into the pillows.

"All I can say is, there better be nobody from that council within two blocks of me when I blow up! And *that'll* happen pretty darn soon!"

He was going out the door when his pager began its shrill beep, calling members of the volunteer fire department to dial in to the emergency conference bridge for direction. But he knew the direction. The explosion had lit up his north window; he could still see the flash of it against his mathematical struggles.

Switching on his lights, he drove off toward Burton Street.

So what *was* to the north?

Al's Gas-O-Hol was a good possibility, old Al not being the most cautious person that ever sloshed gasoline into a plastic milk container. Farther out was the lumberyard, then a few houses straggling away among the fields. And, of course, one couldn't forget the meat-packing plant . . .

Lakeview Packers. Largest employer in End of Main. At least it had been the largest

employer until money problems had all but strangled it.

He pushed quickly north. Up the side streets porch lights winked on and people wandered out onto verandahs with robes pulled about them, gazing sleepily around.

He passed Al's (all quiet there) and rounded the curve onto the highway. As the town lights fell away in his rear view mirror, he spotted a telltale red-orange blush down low in the sky that meant fire. He put the pedal down hard and was already pulled up on the road allowance at the burning packing plant when the End of Main emergency brigade hove into view, old Stu Baker—it had to be Stu—leading the lumbering pumper truck in his rescue wagon, hurtling toward Robideau at full bore.

In three minutes the entire volunteer brigade was standing with Robideau on the plant approach road looking at the fire. They could feel the flat heat of it at two hundred yards, and there was a pungent scent to the air.

"Pooh. Stinks," Jerome Whittaker said.

"Nothin' we can do about this," Stu bleated disappointedly. He had left home so fast he had forgotten to put his teeth in and, with his stubbly, sunken cheeks, looked like

something from a cult horror film. "Y'know, just once I'd like to save somethin'. All's we ever have to show for a night's work is a great big smokin' hole in the ground."

"Well, you may be in luck this time," Robideau told him dryly. "The whole upper section will go, it's wood construction. But the main floor and the incinerator building—all that brick—might make out okay."

"If you count bricks blown halfway out the walls as okay," Stu snorted. "But I guess we got to go through the motions." He shook his head. "You think anyone was in there?"

It was a rhetorical question.

Robideau stood back to let the big yellow pumper maneuver through the debris scattered over the graveled approach road, and after a lot of hollering and gear-grinding, the men got a thin jet of water arcing toward the staggered walls. It was a puny attempt. They might as well have peed on the place.

A horn brayed thinly, and turning, the chief saw the headlights of a car rushing towards them. Joe Garson. Joe owned the only Lincoln Town Car for miles, and not only that, he owned the plant. When it slid to a halt, Robideau opened the door and eased him-

self into the plush leather seat. Joe's long, lugubrious face behind his drooping mustache looked even sadder than usual at the moment.

"What the hell happened, Robideau?"

"Your plant blew up." It was a dumb answer, but no dumber than the question.

Garson made a dissatisfied face. "Think maybe you could tell me *why* it blew up, *how* it blew up, and then as a special favor, maybe even *who* blew it up? You can do that, can't you? You're the police, after all."

Robideau replied coolly. "I may be chief of police but I'm not the town psychic." He dipped his chin at the blaze. "That'll smolder for days. It'll take time to investigate."

"So get started already."

"I will. I suppose you're insured?"

"Of course I am." Then Joe shot him an injured look. "But you better not be thinking I had anything to do with this."

"I'm not thinking anything—yet. Did you keep explosives on site?"

"That's a funny question. Why, for God's sake, would I keep explosives at a meat-packing plant?"

"I don't know. Explosive chemicals, maybe?"

"We use all kinds of chemicals, but nothing that blows up."

"How about gas?"

"We use gas for processing and heating." Joe nodded as the idea took hold. "Yeah, that could be it. Gas is a good bet. Only it don't explain what touched it off."

Robideau cleared his throat, putting his next idea very gently. "There is one other thing to consider. Whether or not it might have been . . . well . . . a bomb."

Garson glanced sideways at him, his gaunt face harshly shadowed.

"A bomb? That's nuts."

"Is it?"

"Next thing you'll ask is if I know anybody who'd *want* to bomb me out." He tugged at his thick, frowning mustache. "And maybe I'd surprise you, too. Maybe I'd say yes."

"Really? Who?"

"Come on, Robideau. I run—I ran—a big operation. I've browned off whole whacks of people. Contractors, customers, suppliers, unions—I can't count all the people who might have a reason to do something crazy. Or thought they did."

"Any favorites?"

"Some goofy employee, maybe. We've had a lot of layoffs with the recession. No telling who might get their fur up over that."

"No telling," the chief said, thinking of Mrs. Robideau.

"Now," Garson said, "will you get out of my car? I'm going to go home, drink rum, and holler and whine at my wife for a while. And then she can take over."

"Take over what?"

"The hollering and whining. You can only do so much of that yourself, you know, and then your throat gives out."

Robideau got out of the car and gazed back at Joe Garson through the passenger's window.

"I have to tell you, Joe, you sure do seem to be taking this awfully well."

"So maybe I'm crying on the inside," Joe replied sourly.

He pulled an illegal U-turn, the big Lincoln heeling sharply on its springs and then chirping asphalt as it roared swiftly back to town.

The phone rang and rang. Finally there was a click, and then a voice like the next to last gasp of a terminal lung patient was rasping into Joe's ear. Joe shook his head impatiently. Crying on the inside, he had told Robideau, and he was beginning to do just that. At first it had seemed like the answer to all his troubles. Kiss the failing plant goodbye and get a huge insurance settlement. But the more he thought about it,

the more he realized it wasn't going to be that easy. When he'd taken out that extra policy, he'd shot himself in the foot, and it was all Verne's fault.

Across from the pay phone, the sun was coming up, dragging more dark grey clouds behind it and heaping them up over the stuccoed false front of Al's Gas-O-Hol.

"Verne," Joe snapped into the phone, "stop gasping!"

"Gasping . . . ?" Verne Taylor creaked.

"I'll hang up and leave you wondering, Verne. Is that what you want me to do?"

Verne came awake quickly. "Oh, it's you, Joe, is it? Jeez, look at the time. This better be good."

"It isn't good. In fact it's bad."

"So what's your point?"

"You want a point, do you? The point of my *shoe*, I'll give you! You and your dumb ideas. Increase the insurance, you said. Maybe something will happen, you said. Well, Verne of the Ten Thousand Errors, I did increase it, and now something *has* happened. My entire plant just blew itself clean off the map!"

"You mean . . ."

"That's right. Gone. Now you see it, now you don't. Only the mushroom-shaped cloud you can see. What's missing, be-

sides nine zillion bricks, is about two hundred hogs on the hoof, which are now on the wing, and I hope an unreasonable facsimile of them falls through your roof any minute, a flaming pork roast on your skull already, Verne of the Totally Empty-Headed!"

"What happened?"

"I should book tours of that head! The Verne Cavern! I could get rich!"

"You are rich."

"I *was* rich."

"You *are* rich, Joe. If what you seem to be telling me is true, then you've struck gold. You'll be thankful you took my advice. When the insurance pays off, you can retire to one of those islands where pretty girls pop grapes into your mouth. What are you complaining about? I don't get it."

Joe just about dropped the phone.

"You don't get it? *You don't get it?* Let me spell it out for you then, Verne! I'll be retiring to *prison*, that's where I'll be retiring to! An island where sadistic guards beat me with sticks! I got a cop here, he's already asking questions about insurance. And what do you think that insurance company is going to say when they find out what you and I have been talking about all those times?"

"You mean . . ."

"About my troubles, and what I could do about them."

"They won't find out."

"They *will*!"

"Joe, Joe, Joe. Only two people know. You and me. So calm down and talk sense." He giggled. "Now, listen. You can level with me. What *did* make the darn place blow up?"

"Who knows? I told Robideau I thought it was gas."

"Gas? That's good, Joe. That's very good."

Verne's tone was infuriating.

"What do you mean 'that's good'? Don't tell me *you* think I blew the place up?"

"Oh, I'd never think that, old friend. The cops could have machines that read your mind—"

"I DID NOT BLOW MY PACKING PLANT UP!"

"All right, all right. Don't bust a corpuscle. Jeez. What else did you tell the cop?"

"I told him I thought I might of been victimized by a disgruntled employee. You can't disgruntle employees any more, Verne. In the old days you could do it, but now you disgruntle them at your peril." He moaned. "I'm ruined. Totally ruined. And I'm going to jail."

"You're not going to jail."

"You're not convincing me, Verne."

Verne let out a deep, windy sigh that rustled on the line like an electrical disturbance.

"Look, suppose they do put you on the hot seat. What can they prove? Like you said, some nut could of done it. Some bonzo employee. No reason why they should hang it on you."

Joe wanted to believe it. It might even be *true*. Joe might be a victim here. He might deserve the *protection* of the law, not the blind wrath of it. Still, there was the insurance company. . . .

"Verne. You better stand by me on this. I could lose my shirt if that insurance don't pay up."

"Stop worrying."

"You can stop worrying. That plant was all I had."

"Listen, if worse comes to worst, maybe I'll give you a few grand for the place. Build a parking lot or something."

"A few grand. A parking lot. And me sitting in prison. I really need this, Verne. Like I need another row of toes!"

"Yeah, well, when you think about it, another row of toes might not be so bad for a guy who's trying to balance on the edge of a cliff, don't you think?"

Joe held the telephone receiver in front of his face, glared at it, then slammed it down angrily.

Bob Jackman—a.k.a. Booger Beak Jackman—had come by his alias honestly. Years

ago, playing snow-forts with the other kids on the ice mounds that were heaped up on the street corners by Josh Bradley's dad, who drove the snowplow when he was sober and sometimes when he wasn't, old Boogie had sported a perpetual, crusty, prenasal drip under his pug nose, which would freeze, then crack, then freeze again all winter long. The kids had teased him mercilessly, making him wince at the thought even now.

But Boogie had risen in the world. Oh yes he had. From the day he won his first spelling competition, he'd been marked for higher things. He was now vice-principal of End of Main High, and he sat on the town council. Not only that, he owned a small real estate business. All of this had once spelt success.

But not now. What it spelt these days was misery. M-I-S-E-R-Y. And all because of Gina Hodgekins and her beguiling female charms. Gina had introduced him to steamy Saturday nights and high living. She had made him realize how little he had actually accomplished in life, that there was more, much more, out there. She had also introduced him to the Crystal Casino in the city, and the rest, as they said, was history.

The profits from his real estate business went first. Then his savings account. He had made a valiant effort to recover by shoving money from the school's discretionary fund into a paper sack and taking that down to the Crystal to see if he couldn't win The Big One, but no luck. Eventually he was siphoning off large sums from the town's expense and capital works budgets, but his troubles just kept getting worse.

And now the town manager was throwing a five letter buzzword around the town hall: audit!

"Mr. Jackman is in conference," he heard Gina say in her brassy voice out in the reception area.

In conference. Like old Boogie was some high-falutin' dean of a university or something. With a groan he heaved himself up from his desk. He felt wasted. He'd got no sleep at all last night. Zero. Z-E-R-O. He went to the door to see who had come calling and immediately regretted it. It was the police chief's wife, and she looked determined enough to carve through his door with a twenty inch chainsaw.

"Booger Beak!" Mrs. Robideau yelled, waving.

Miss Hodgekins' head jerked at this impertinence, and Jack-

man glared hard at Mrs. Robideau.

"Boogie," she hollered, "I got to talk to you."

She came through the gate and barged right into his office, as if she felt that being the wife of the chief of police should be good for something besides a poke with a sharp stick. Boogie didn't argue. It was a visit from her husband he was scared of. He closed the door and collapsed at his desk.

"Boogie," she began, "listen—"

"Mrs. Robideau, do you think you could be so kind as to address me as Mr. Jackman?"

"I guess so," Mrs. Robideau said. Then she narrowed her eyes and took a closer look at him. "Holy cow, you look awful. Like something left at the back of a fridge. You're not eating right, Boogie. Or something. Now listen, about this ten days off my husband just got—"

Boogie sighed.

"Mrs. Robideau, that matter is settled. It's to help the town budget, and I have neither the authority nor the inclination to make special arrangements on behalf of specific individuals."

"I only want justice."

Boogie flinched. Justice. J-U-S... *He* certainly didn't want that.

Mrs. Robideau said, "You got to understand here, Boogie, po-

lice work is different. Like right now. That explosion. Something goes bump in the night, and my husband has to get up and go see to it. He's *still* seeing to it, and it's his *unpaid day off!*"

Miss Hodgekins interrupted just then, putting her teased head of hair in the door. She whispered into Boogie's ear, he recoiled, and then he picked up the phone as if it were in the habit of giving him electrical shocks.

"Don't phone me here, Verne!" he hissed. "Yes, I did. No, I didn't. Yes, yes, I'll take care of it. I *said* I'd take care of it, didn't I? I'll get back to you. Goodbye." He hung up and looked sheepishly at Mrs. Robideau, smiled weakly, and said, "Real estate."

Mrs. Robideau shrugged.

"The chief didn't know this explosion was going to happen. So why can't he switch his day off to some other time when he don't have a big giant emergency to contend with—"

It was a bad idea to keep Verne waiting. Boogie owed him too much money. He got up and pulled on his coat.

"Mrs. Robideau, if we let him do something like that, we'd have to let everybody else do it, too, and things would soon become impossible to monitor, wouldn't they?"

She trailed him out the door and into the outer office, Boogie painfully aware of Miss Hodgekins' big painted eyes and shell-like ears straining for information. He herded Mrs. Robideau into the hall.

"Boogie," Mrs. Robideau said, as the door swung shut, "you've raised a good point. What I want to know is, who's monitoring *you*?"

A cold chill struck him.

"What do you mean by that?"

"What do you mean, what do I mean? You know darn well what I mean. I mean, who's going to monitor *your* ten days off?"

Boogie relaxed and let out a nervous breath.

"That's outrageous! I'll work like the devil, and *still* have that cut in pay!"

She trotted after him, out into the sunshine.

"In your basic pay, sure. But what about all your perks and bonuses, councillor?"

"That's none of your beeswax."

"You're darn tootin' it is. I'm a taxpayer. And you got your real estate business, too, so don't try and tell me you're taking the same kick in the pants as everyone else. I bet you got so much money coming in you got to sort it out with a hay baler!"

Boogie hurried away down the street to find a pay phone, thinking ruefully, oh no, Mrs. Police Chief, you're wrong about that. It's the money that goes O-U-T *out* that's hard to keep track of.

And Mrs. Robideau was thinking: you've been doing something like the devil, all right, but I don't think it was work. And who the heck is Verne?

At the Netley Hotel, the chief found the End of Main Gang—Wilmer Gates, Chuck Lang, Pete Melynychuk, and that old grinning death's-head, Wolverton—grouped around their usual table like they were chained to it.

They were dimly lit bulbs, all four of them, bright as the throat of a blacksmith's stovepipe, but they thrived on gossip, and generally stayed up late enough to put the town to bed at night. There wasn't much happened that they didn't know about.

The chief sat down.

"So I guess you boys heard all about the explosion."

Pete snorted. "Heard about it? Hell, we were *in* it. Chuck here pretty near had a heart attack. And Wolverton was sound asleep in bed when it hit, and his eyes flew open and he

dumped a full beer and a lit cigarette down his shirt, didn't you, Wolve?"

Wolverton grinned. He rarely said much. That being how he was.

"Any ideas?" Robideau asked.

"Hard to tell, chief," Pete said. "The way that place went up? Wow! Roast pork from here to Tuesday."

Wilmer said, "You tryin' to tell us an exploding pig blew it up?"

Pete got snarly. "No, I'm not tryin' to tell you an exploding pig blew it up!" He took a swig of beer and added cantankerously, "But it could of. Pigs get gas, I bet."

"Cows do," Chuck Lang said. "I heard 'em poot."

The chief cleared his throat. "Do you think we could get serious here? I'd like to know what time you guys rolled home last night."

"Early," Pete said. "Around two."

"That's early, is it? What were you doing till that hour? Not drinking in the back room of the Legion, I hope?"

"Oh, I couldn't admit to that, chief. Anyways, I wasn't the only one."

"So all of you were there. I can see I'm going to have to pull that license someday. But never mind. When you finally

went home, did you see anything unusual?"

"Where?" Pete asked suspiciously.

"Around. In the streets."

"Like what?"

"I don't know. Just anything."

Pete resettled the grubby John Deere hat on his head. "Well, let's see. We all drifted out at about the same time..."

"They threw us out," Chuck admitted.

"They threw *you* out," Pete snapped. "We got blamed for no reason. We was innocent."

"So you came out of the Legion about two. What did you see? Was there any activity in the streets?"

Pete snorted. "You must be kidding. There's no activity on Burton Street in the middle of rush hour, never mind two in the morning."

"Just that car nearly ran you down, an' you swore an' threw a beer bottle at it," Wilmer reminded him.

"I never threw no beer bottle. It was a gin bottle. And it wasn't a car, it was a truck. And it was self-defense."

"What truck?" Robideau asked.

"Hard to say. It was dark out."

"It was dark out for you," Wilmer said, "that's for sure.

But *I* know whose truck it was. It was Gadget Jenkins' truck."

"Was Gadget driving it?" Robideau asked patiently.

Wilmer shook his head. "Couldn't say. Went by too quick."

"An' it was dark out," Pete insisted.

"Was anybody else around?"

"Nope."

The chief stood up. "I guess I'm going to have to go and talk to Gadget Jenkins. Where can I find him? Any ideas?"

Mrs. Robideau served noodle soup for lunch.

"So there was Gina Hodgkins in Booger Beak's office, acting as if no one ever heard about her midnight dash to the city back in '63 with the federal grain agent, and how her dad had the cops pull them over just short of Teulon, Gina with a suitcase crammed with saucy underwear and the agent with a trunkload of photographic equipment. I barged right past her and just got started telling Boogie where the grass grows when the next thing I know the phone rings and he jumps and legs it out the door."

"The phone?" the chief remarked absently.

"Yes. A call from some goon name of Verne. Well, you should of seen Boogie. He beat it out of that office like an

Olympic steroid champion going for gold. Five minutes later I'm popping out of the Rexall and there he is blathering into a pay phone with his face as pale as the main event at an open casket funeral."

"So?" the chief said, spooning his hot soup.

"So why does a man run to a pay phone when he's got a perfectly good phone right there in his own private office? Don't you think that's strange? And how did Gina Hodgekins get to be his personal secretary when she can't type three words in a row without using up half a bottle of Wite-Out? And *what* hadn't Boogie got around to? And who is this Verne?"

"There are plenty of Vernes in the world."

"But only one phoning Boogie."

"What of it?"

"You're the crime genius. Don't ask me to solve your mysteries for you."

"My mystery? Something's only a mystery to me if I'm puzzled by it. And I'm not puzzled, you are."

"A man pretty near faints and then gallops out at fifty miles an hour, and you tell me you're not puzzled?"

Robideau stopped spooning his soup and looked at her gravely. "I'm puzzled by one thing. What were you doing in

Bob Jackman's office in the first place?"

Mrs. Robideau glared back at him as if he were five layers too thick to know a mystery from a Mack truck. "Maybe you can figure that out, too, since you're about the smartest thing ever held a policeman's hat up off the floor!"

The chief found Gadget down at the nuisance grounds sorting through the rubbish, gathering bits of wiring and assorted mechanical oddments into a pile on the tailgate of his truck. He tried to tidy up when he saw Robideau, tucking his long, stained Fighting Irish jersey into his pants, oblivious to the fact that he was forcing it out his wide-open fly. He was a gaunt, stooping man who lived on roots and roadkill, according to Wilmer Gates. He had eyebrows sprouting wildly out of control, and he pulled a long, grubby hand down his face at Robideau's first question.

"Me drive around in the middle of the night? Not a chance, chief. I'm home gettin' my beauty sleep that time of night."

Robideau glanced at his truck. "Any other vehicles like yours around?"

Gadget laughed. "Fleets of 'em."

"Mind if I take a look?"

"Go ahead on."

The chief pulled the passenger door open and peered into the cab. It had a bench seat with the vinyl seams split open, an overflowing ashtray, and a CB radio with its mike clipped to the dash and its long curly cord drooping down. The cab smelt like stale beer, cigarettes, and essence of Gadget Jenkins. Robideau closed the door and looked into the bed of the truck. It was empty. Clean as a whistle. He decided to try a bluff. "Hello," he said.

Gadget straightened up.

"Hello, what?"

"Hello to the bottom of your box. I never saw it before in my life. Have you been spring cleaning?"

Gadget sidled closer to the rusted pickup with that anxious distrust of authority common to those who skirt the edges of legality.

"Supposin' I was. What's it to you?"

"I want to put it in my report."

"Report? What report?"

"The report I'm drawing up on the Lakeview Packers explosion."

Gadget looked wary. "What's that got to do with me?"

"Nothing, I hope. Because if it does, you could wind up spending the declining years of your life in a cell at Stony

Mountain." The chief drew his finger through the dust in one of the grooves in the floor of the box, and clucked his tongue. "See these little crystals? Do you know what that is?"

Gadget shook his head. There was a new, desperate look growing in his eyes, and his grizzled Adam's apple went up and down.

"Well, I think I do," the chief lied. "Of course, I'll have to get the lab boys in the city to confirm it, but I don't think there's much question." He tore a sheet from his notebook, twisted it into a funnel, and made a big thing about scooping up a little of the dust and putting it away in his pocket. "You know, I always kind of liked you, Gadget. When this thing comes to court, I sure wish I could tell the judge you'd been more cooperative."

Gadget took a step closer, his eyes red and glistening.

"Look, I never had nothing to do with it! All's I did was lend out my truck! How am I supposed to know what somebody does with it? How am I supposed to know that?"

"Who did you lend it to?"

"I—I don't remember."

"No? Well, then you better prime the old mental pump."

Gadget walked away, stood looking off among the piles of mouldering junk and nervously

rubbing his hands on the front of his shirt. Then he turned around.

"I loaned it to Mrs. Larsen."

"Ah. You work for her, right? The woman that runs the laundromat?"

Gadget nodded, the lump in his throat still bobbing. "I keep her machines running. She said the truck was for her nephew in Riverton. He'd just got married and had to move some furniture."

"I see." The chief nodded at the little heap of steel pipe, switches, and wires. "Tell me something. What do you do with this stuff?"

"I build things for people."

"What kind of things?"

"Just things. Whatever they want. But listen, chief, I never—"

Relief blossomed on his face as the phone in Robideau's car gave a chirp, and the chief walked back and reached through the window for it. It was the fire inspector with some new and interesting information to share.

"A rson?" Joe gaped at the chief in disbelief. Since last talking to Robideau, Joe had plummeted to the depths of despair and had then been raised partway up again. First he'd

learned that his insurance company intended to fight any claim for compensation. Then Verne had called and offered to buy Joe out at thirty cents on the dollar, explaining that he felt "somewhat responsible" for Joe's situation. It was like hearing Tojo admit to being "somewhat responsible" for the damage to Pearl Harbor. Still, Joe had begun to feel a wee bit better about things—until Robideau had waltzed in to darken his day again.

"Not gas?"

"Not gas. It was one of my crazy questions, remember? And now it's confirmed. The inspectors found traces of some sort of bomb or incendiary."

"What kind of traces?"

"Fertilizer."

"Fertilizer?" Joe felt weak enough to pass out, but he managed to force a poor joke. "Boy, if you can make a bomb out of that, I guess you can make one out of just about anything. Rice Krispies, next. Kellogg's Corn Flakes . . ."

"Did you keep fertilizer out at the plant?"

"Come on, chief, there was livestock wandering all over the place."

"You know what I'm talking about. *Chemical* fertilizer."

"You mean . . . uh . . . like phosphates?"

"I mean, uh, like nitrates."

Robideau's eyes appeared to be looking deep into Joe's soul, as if he didn't believe a word Joe was saying. But Joe had answered truthfully. He hadn't kept bomb-making materials on hand. Not knowingly, at least.

"The inspector found traces of the stuff," Robideau said. "He said it would of had to be mixed with something else. Like furnace oil. Did you use furnace oil out there?"

"No."

"Diesel fuel, then?"

"Well, naturally we had diesel fuel for the yard equipment . . ."

"Furnace oil, diesel fuel—same difference. Who had access to it?"

"The equipment operators."

"And yourself."

Joe gazed back at him with a sickly look. "Of course *I* had access. I *owned* the place. I had access to everything, but that doesn't mean I—"

"One other thing, Joe. You pretty near beat me and the fire department out to the scene that night. I realize you heard the explosion like everyone else, but how did you know it was connected with the plant?"

Joe groped for an answer. What could he say? That he had been praying for weeks that the place would self-de-

struct? He hoped the chief couldn't see the sweat on his face.

"I—I don't know, chief. My sixth sense, I guess."

Robideau looked very solemn. "Well, Joe, I got to tell you something. I'm starting to develop a sixth sense about this thing myself, and I have to say the vision I'm getting doesn't look very good for you at the moment."

As the chief walked away, Joe Garson felt so weak in the knees he could barely stand up.

Robideau's next stop was the laundromat. He was pretty sure it would be a dead end, that Mrs. Larsen had borrowed her handyman's truck for her nephew just as she had said. No way she could be mixed up in anything like this; she was seventy years old. But he had to check out the lead. He found the old woman sitting upstairs drinking Gatorade out of a mug with red lettering that said WHEN I WANT YOUR OPINION I'LL GIVE IT TO YOU. He told her he'd had no idea she had a nephew in Riverton.

"Why would you?" she asked irritably. "Is a person supposed to register their relatives with the police nowadays? Is that what the world's come to?"

Robideau pulled up a molded deck chair and sat down. He'd

never been up here before. It was a small apartment with a screened-in porch, a sort of balcony tacked onto the rear of the main building. From what he could see of it, not much attention had been paid to construction codes.

The chief smiled. "No, that's not what the world's come to, thank goodness. But I've lived here as long—*almost* as long—as you have, and I just thought I would have heard."

"There's lots of things out there—" she flicked her hand at the town—"that you don't hear about, Chief Robideau. Sorry to break it to you. And who's been blabbing my private business around, anyways? Gadget Jenkins, I bet. Well, that's the last time I let *him* run up a three month tab on me."

"Borrows ahead on his wages, does he?"

"He's *always* borrowing from me."

"Is that why he lent you his truck?"

She gave him a cool look, gripped her mug firmly, and took a quick, angry sip from it.

The chief said, "You won't mind giving me the phone number of your nephew, will you? I'd like to talk to him."

"Of course I *mind*. And anyways, I don't even know it. I just got through telling you he moved, didn't I?"

Robideau sighed and stood up. "Okay, Mrs. Larsen. I guess we understand each other." He tilted his head back and peered at the ceiling. "You know, I bet you must have three foot centers to your joists up there. The most they're supposed to be is twenty-four inches. And I'm pretty sure Lumex cable shouldn't be tacked to the edges of the joists like that..."

Mrs. Larsen banged down her cup, and her lined face was fierce. "Is this some new sort of secret police harassment, or just what? Are you a cop or a building inspector?"

"All I know is, if you could tell me more about this nephew of yours, I'd be awful obliged to you," Robideau said, giving her a broad, friendly smile.

“A”nd so,” the chief confided to Mrs. Robideau later, “it turns out that Mrs. Larsen doesn’t have any nephew in Riverton. She told me she calls every town that she can’t remember the name of Riverton.”

“Ellen Larsen’s only got one nephew. Nine hundred nieces, but only one nephew, everybody knows that.”

“I didn’t know it.”

“Huh. And you call yourself a policeman.”

“So just who *is* her nephew?”

"Oho! *Now* you're finally interested. I couldn't hand it to you on a plate two days ago, and now you're just about ready to beat it out of me with your riot stick."

Robideau calmly dipped his finger into her bowl of chocolate icing.

"I don't beat people with riot sticks. And I'm not sure I know what you're talking about."

"You *would* know what I was talking about if you weren't deaf in one ear and couldn't hear out of the other one."

"Are you going to tell me what you're driving at, or do I have to dig it out of you with a fork?"

"There! Police brutality! I knew you'd get around to it." Mrs. Robideau broke an egg into a saucer, peered at it, then dumped it into a bowl. "What did I say to you in this very kitchen not forty-eight hours ago? I said Booger Beak Jackman was acting suspiciously. And you weren't interested. If you had been, I might have told you Boogie is Ellen Larsen's nephew."

"Her nephew? Are you sure?"

"Huh! So now you think I'm lying."

"No. It's just that . . . how could she forget that her nephew lives in the same town as she does? And he didn't just get married. The woman's hid-

ing something. Besides, Boogie's a big shot here in town. I can't see what he'd need an old beat-up truck for."

"Probably for the same thing as anybody else. To haul something."

"But what?" Chief Robideau leaned back against the counter and licked icing out of his mustache. "Maybe I'm going at this all wrong. Maybe I should concentrate on Joe Garson. He's the most likely suspect."

Mrs. Robideau threw down her mixing spoon crossly. "Now look. With all your darn blathering, I've lost track here." She reached for her recipe card. "I got to go back a few steps."

The chief put his hat on. "You know, that's something I ought to try, too."

At Gadget Jenkins' trailer, there was no sign of him or his truck. The chief pulled off into a grove of blue spruce, then walked back up the rutted road to the place.

Robideau had strong opinions on homes. To him they were like people's fingerprints: all similar, all unique. Take this place. Gadget's trailer. It could have been home to almost any slob, but it wasn't. It was Gadget's place. It had his stamp all over it, the yard a confusion of junk brought back

from the nuisance grounds and stored in overflowing green garbage bags.

Robideau thumped on the door, wondering if possibly Gadget had lent out his truck again, but there was no answer. So he took a little stroll around the back.

There was a potting shed near the woodpile, and the chief wandered over to it. There had recently been a hasp lock on the door, he could see the outline of it against the rust; but the steel flap was pulled back, and the lock was missing from its loop.

The chief eased the door open and stuck his head inside. Not breaking and entering, just looking. It was gloomy inside the shed, and it smelled strange; but as his eyes adjusted to the dim light, he saw a rough, wooden workbench under a cobwebbed window, a number of cans and jars stacked along it, a voltmeter that said REALISTIC on it, and lots of switches, wires, and other assorted junk. A thin booklet was propped open with a wrench. Turning his gaze to the rest of the shed, he saw several large propane cylinders crowded against the far wall.

He was already getting a gleam of suspicion as to what Gadget's latest project had been when he saw a wooden

box containing a number of what were very definitely blasting caps. Robideau grunted.

He leaned farther in and squinted at the title of the booklet on the bench.

The Anarchist's Cookbook, he read.

"Well," he said out loud. And he clucked his tongue. "Well, well."

"I knew he was some kind of a weird inventor," Mrs. Robideau said. "I heard all kinds of strange things about him. He'll build you anything, only it don't always work right. He built a trap for Mrs. Provost to catch Mrs. Aird's cat that was pooping in her flower bed, and it caught Mrs. Wynn's toy poodle by mistake, and Mrs. Wynn had to go over and hit Mrs. Provost with a plastic watering pail to get her dog set free." She turned back to her work. "Anyway, I don't see the problem. If you suspect him, go and arrest him."

"I'd like to. Only I'm not positive I can connect him with the bombing. Maybe Joe hired him. I don't know." The chief sighed wearily. "I wish this layoff hadn't come along. Even my secretary's deserted me. Claudia Webb's taking her ten days all in a row." He tried for more icing, but Mrs. Robideau

whacked his knuckles with her big wooden spoon.

"If you're foolish enough to let Claudia do that, then there's just no help for you, is there?"

"This is our slow month as a rule—"

"Slow! Explosions, bombs. If this is too slow for you, move to Detroit. Or Washington, D.C., I heard it's the crime capital of the world. Oprah said that. Or was it that other woman?" She grunted. "Anyways, it'll be murder next."

"Don't say that."

"I just did. So less talk and more action. That's what the world wants from you."

Booger Beak Jackman felt as much like having dinner with Verne Taylor as he felt like sharing stir-fry with Hannibal the Cannibal. What he really wanted was to be heading south at six hundred miles an hour, thirty thousand feet in the air, with Gina at his side and his five thousand dollars strapped around his love handles in a money belt. He'd done his part, he deserved to be paid. But Verne just kept on stalling.

Boogie drove sullenly down to the city, collected Verne, and ferried him to the restaurant, Verne humming "Pigs on the Wing" by Pink Floyd the whole

way. There Verne ordered dinosaur bones, and Boogie thought with glum intensity, sure, what else?

"You're nervous," Verne remarked, knotting up his brows and grinning. "What's the problem?"

"Robideau's asking questions," Boogie said. "He's even sending his *wife* around to ask questions. It's almost like he suspects Garson's plant was an inside job or something."

Verne scoffed. "So? What are you worried about? You're not out on a limb. Joe is. Like it's supposed to be." He chuckled. "I wish I'd been a fly on the wall when he tried to put in his claim. I bet they laughed him out the door. A guy with his financial troubles and the fact he just doubled his insurance coverage."

"And the anonymous phone call you told me to make, saying he'd been talking about something maybe happening to his plant."

"That, too. Anyway, they told him to go jump, and then I made *my* move. Did you draw up the papers?"

"I *told* you I drew up the papers," Boogie said weakly.

"Two sets, huh? One set, Joe selling the land to me, and one set, me selling the land to that developer, and all the amounts blank. I can plug the numbers

in myself, soon as I know what they are. That developer's still on the hook, I hope?"

"Yes. He still wants his mall. But I'm worried, Verne—"

"A mall in End of Main. He's as crazy as Joe is."

"I had expenses. I've got to pay off—"

"It's all working out perfect," Verne gloated. "Joe was a little sulky, but I know deep down inside he was tickled by my offer."

"He should be tickled he's not in jail," Boogie said soberly. "And so should we. That Robideau—"

Verne suddenly flared up.

"Will you stop it with Robideau, already? You're as bad as Joe! If the cop's bugging you that much, do something about it. You got connections. Pull him off. It's that simple."

Pull Robideau off? And call it simple? You might as well try to pull a bull terrier off your leg.

"Don't sweat it," Verne said, "I'm not." He sounded as self-assured as the Godfather. "The way I look at it, that dumb cop has about as much chance of connecting this to me—oh, and you, too, of course—as I have of reaching the moon."

Boogie found it difficult to look Verne in the eye. Not for the first time did he regret submitting to Verne's bribes and

veiled threats. It would almost be better to face the audit.

"The way I see it, so far, so good," Verne said. "There's just one more thing to do before I give you your money."

"What's that?"

"You and me are going to go for a ride."

Verne wiped grease off his chin with a napkin, and when he grinned, there were bits of shredded dinosaur stuck between his teeth.

Boogie couldn't believe it. He was certain old Verne had sprung a head gear or something. Gone nuts. N-U-T-S. But you didn't argue with Verne, and at ten minutes past midnight they were rolling up the wide, winding access road of the plant in Boogie's car.

It was an eerie scene. The debris of the ruined plant lay all about, thin wisps of smoke drifting here and there, and they could feel the latent heat of the fire under their feet. Clouds like steel wool hung low in the sky, crowding out a three-quarter moon, and a cool wind blew out of the north. Boogie hugged his jacket about him while Verne gazed around, enormously pleased with himself.

"Looks like we really did a number here."

"Yes," Boogie assured him. "But what's this all about, Verne?"

Verne walked deeper into the place, his feet raising little puffs of ash as if he were setting off miniature explosions himself with each step. In the ell of a shattered wall, he stopped and turned, pulled a folded note out of his pocket, and handed it over. "Read this."

Boogie looked at it. It was a short note, just one line, and read: *I know all about it. Be at the old incinerator at midnight tonight.* It was messy and had a lot of misspellings. Verne took the note back.

"I only know of one old incinerator, and it's the one at this plant. I want you to meet this person and find out what this is all about."

Boogie was aghast.

"Me? Why me?"

"Because you're the hired help, that's why."

"Oh no. I'm not going in there. That's not my job. I've *done* my job. I—"

Verne took something out of his pocket. In the murkiness Boogie wasn't sure what it was; then, with a dull, hollow feeling, he recognized it. Verne had pulled a gun on him.

"Somebody's connected me with this. That wasn't supposed to happen. You're the only one that could of spilled

the beans, so now you're going to go inside that old place and find out what this is all about. Now get moving."

The chief had been trying all day to locate Booger Jackman, but he hadn't got anywhere. The same went for Gad-
get. He had tried the trailer again and then stopped by the laundromat, but Mrs. Larsen said she hadn't seen him. Now he and Mrs. Robideau sat at the dining room table discussing the matter.

"You think Gadget blew up Joe's plant, don't you?" Mrs. Robideau said.

"I'm sure he had something to do with it."

"And Boogie?"

"He fits into this, too, somehow."

"I can't see that. I can't see Boogie getting involved in such a darn-fool thing. I mean, he's got everything going for him. It don't make sense."

"It makes sense if you buy into some other ideas," the chief said.

"Like what?"

"Like if there was a real estate connection someplace. Say you wanted to buy a place cheap, how might you manage it? Mess it up, and make sure it's not covered by insurance."

"But it *was* covered by insurance. You said so yourself. Too much insurance, in fact."

The chief looked at her somberly. "Too much insurance can be as bad as no insurance."

Questions.

The chief got up and wandered into the kitchen. Mrs. Robideau bustled after him. "I knew you'd return to the scene of the crime," she said. The cake she had baked earlier sat on the countertop, one corner of it without any icing.

The chief stood there and pulled at his chin. "I'm going out," he said suddenly.

The interior of the incinerator building was as dismal as a bombed-out church. Moonlight filtered in through tall mulioned windows with jagged, broken panes. The huge incinerator squatted in the middle of the room looking as if it hadn't been used in thirty years, its heavy iron gratings drooping and most of its sooty brick chimney knocked down.

Booger Beak Jackman felt as soft and inadequate as a boiled parsnip. He let the heavy, spring-loaded door fall shut behind him and tottered into the room.

"H-hello?"

His voice sounded frail. As frail as a kid's. A kid with a

cracked lip at the bottom of a snowpile.

"Anybody here?"

He got his frightened limbs to move and stumbled completely around the big furnace in a wide circle, peering worriedly into the shadows. Back at the spot he had started from, he stood wondering what to do next. And then Verne put his head in the door.

"Nobody around?"

"No."

"That's interesting." He came into the room behind his gun. "That only leaves one explanation, then. *You* sent the note. It was an excuse to get me out here so you could try something."

Boogie was appalled. Try something with this dinosaur-eater?

"Try what?"

"Try and knock me off. I wasn't born yesterday."

"Verne, honest, I never—"

"Only now the shoe's on the other foot. I get to take care of you." He stared around. "Help me with this. What could happen to a careless real estate guy poking around a burnt-out building? I guess one of those leaning timbers might fall on his bean. Or a hunk of that galvanized pipe." He scratched his ear. "It's got to look natural for when old Robideau comes nosing around. Any ideas?"

"You actually expect me to help you?" Boogie let out something between a laugh and a sob. "You're crazy. C-R-A-Z-Y!"

Verne clucked his tongue. "And you're not cooperating. That's the trouble with some businessmen today—they aren't client-oriented. If you were Japanese, you'd be only too glad to help out. Or if you were German—"

"Put down the gun," a voice from the darkness said.

Verne blinked.

"Who said that?"

It had been a thin, brittle voice. Outside, the wind was rising, southing through the huge shattered windows and rattling the jagged panes. Boogie tried to pinpoint the voice, and a small hope stirred inside him.

Verne was jabbing the gun around. "Who's there? Show yourself!"

"I told you to drop the gun," the voice said, "and you got ten seconds. Then I'm gonna drop you."

Verne let out a pained wheeze. His eyes blinked a few times, but he let go of the gun. It clattered like a toy on the grimy concrete floor.

"Good. Now look by the door. See what's hanging on that nail? That chain and padlock? Take it to the furnace, both of you, loop it through one of them

gratings, then through your belts, an' put the lock through the links and snap it shut."

"Are you crazy?" Verne belated. But Boogie fetched the chain. He didn't want to get shot. In minutes they were chained to the incinerator. Only then did a figure shuffle out of the deep shadows of the room, a lean man wearing jeans and a Fighting Irish jersey. He was unarmed. He picked up Verne's gun.

"Gadget!" Boogie said.

"Now listen. One of you guys has got my money," Gadget said. "My thousand dollars. I want it *now*—or else!"

Verne sneered at him. "Or else what?"

"Or else I'm gonna blow you sky high. I never meant to leave this building standing anyways. It's sort of like unfinished business to me. Just like my money."

"But, Gadget," Boogie pleaded. "I told you you'd get paid just as soon as Verne here came across."

"What? You're blaming me for this?" Verne snarled.

Suddenly Boogie saw red. "*You're darn right I'm blaming you!*" He jerked on the chain, bouncing Verne's forehead off the furnace. "*If you'd kept to your side of the bargain, this wouldn't be happening, would it?*"

Verne squealed in pain and anger.

"But you weren't supposed to let this moron know about me! You were supposed to keep me out of it! *That* was the deal! This is all *your* fault!"

Gadget consulted his watch. "I want my money. You guys got three minutes."

"What does he mean, three minutes?" Verne asked. There was a tremor in his voice.

"It means," Gadget answered, "I'm gonna send you to the same place the pigs all went unless you come across with my dough."

"But he *can't* blow us up," Verne said frantically to Boogie.

"I think he can," Boogie said. "He's a handy guy." Then he added, "You know, I don't think you ever meant to pay me off either. I think I've been duped all along, too. And now I'm going to get blown up."

"Two minutes."

Verne was craning his head like a tortoise. "I don't see no bomb. This nut's just bluffing."

"I never bluff. And you're running out of time."

"Pay him, Verne," Boogie pleaded.

"How can I pay him?" Verne snarled viciously. "I didn't bring no thousand dollars!"

"We're down to seconds," Gadget told them.

"I never should have trusted you, Verne," Boogie sobbed.

Gadget was backing away.

"Twenny-nine . . . twenny-eight . . ."

He stepped behind a brick outcropping. Only his head showed above it.

"Fifteen . . . fourteen . . ."

Boogie was shaking so bad, the chain was rattling. Verne was almost apoplectic. His eyes were enormous, traced with red veins. "Stop this guy! Can't you stop this guy?"

"You should have paid up, Verne."

"... ten, nine, eight . . ."

Verne gave a thin, high squeal. He strained against the chain.

"... five, four . . . three . . ."

"What's going on in here?" Chief Robideau growled, stepping into the room.

Verne gave a lurch, and his belt snapped. Both he and Boogie fell flat on their rumps. Unexpectedly freed, in a burst of crazed terror Verne scrambled through the open door of the incinerator and slammed it on himself.

"... *one!*" Gadget said.

There was a silence. Boogie clenched his teeth. Then:

WHUMP!

The incinerator shuddered. It seemed to rise up off its footings. Soot flew out of every crack and orifice, and a large

fissure appeared in its cast-iron face.

"My God!" Boogie said, horrified.

Gadget came back into view, his head rising like a periscope behind the wall of brick. "Not enough salt," he said. "It never even blew the damn door off."

"So what made you drive out to the plant?" Mrs. Robideau asked him.

"It was something you said. About the cake, and revisiting the scene of the crime. And I'd looked for them everywhere else."

"So you walked in, the furnace blew up, and then what?"

"I arrested them, of course," the chief told her. "Gadget and your schoolchum Boogie."

"And the other one? That Verne?"

Robideau looked gravely at her and moved his head from side to side.

Mrs. Robideau splashed tea into two large cups. "So Joe Garson's in the clear, I guess."

"It sort of looks like it. Boogie blames Verne for everything. He says Verne knew about both Joe's and Boogie's problems. He also knew there was a group wanting to build a mall outside the town. So he put it all together, hatched the plot, and roped Boogie into it, threatening to expose Boogie's funny

bookkeeping and offering him money if he went along with the idea."

"What about Gadget?"

"Gadget just wanted the cash. Boogie asked for his help when he came to collect the truck. He didn't have a clue as to how to destroy the plant, and he didn't want to get his hands dirty. So he was only too happy to write Gadget into the script."

Mrs. Robideau folded her own hands and plumped them on the table.

"So does this mean you won't be taking the ten days off?"

"That depends on the council. And this time you'll have to believe them, no matter what they say."

"Hmph! How come?"

"There were flying pigs, weren't there? Zooming all over the sky."

She gazed at him a moment. And then a sudden sly gleam showed in her eyes. "But there wasn't a blue moon shining, was there? And I distinctly remember including the FBI in the argument."

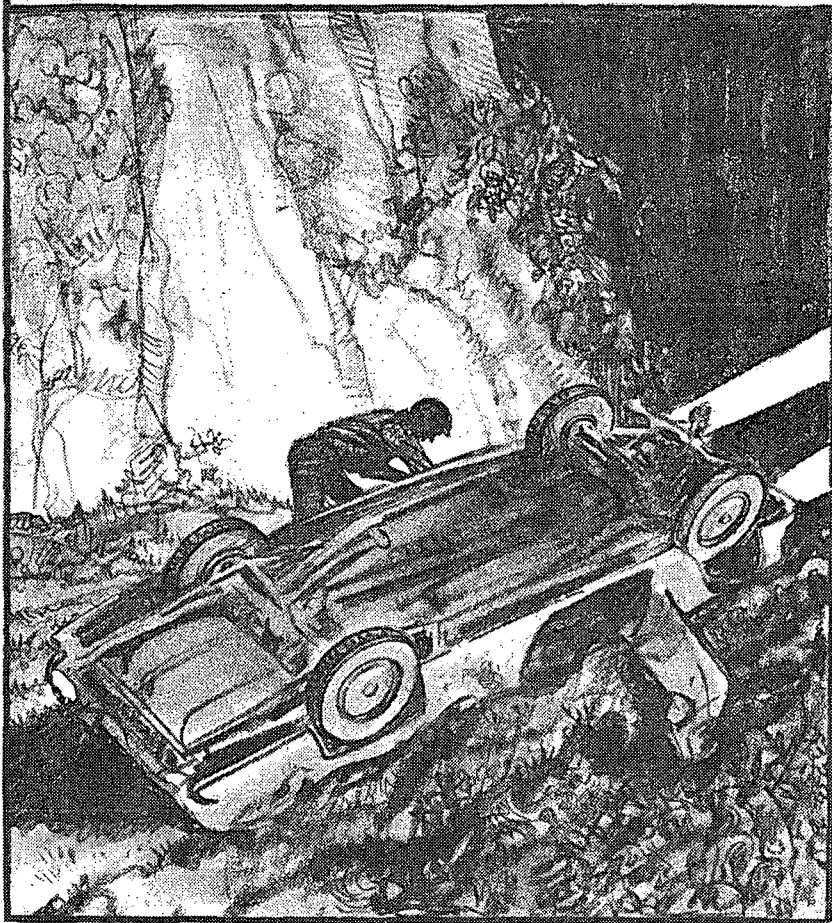
The chief gave it up. "One of these days," he said, "I'll win an argument with you."

Mrs. Robideau sniffed. "The day that happens," she replied, "there'll be—" Then she stopped. "Wait a minute. I better not say it. After all, it just might come true." ■

FICTION

THE CASE OF THE DAYDREAMER AND THE INTENTIONAL ACCIDENT

James A. Noble



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Illustration by Richard Loehle

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“You know I have a great deal of respect for your advice and your opinions in most of my cases,” said Captain Evert after Detective Sergeant Mark Murphy had gotten comfortable in the chair across from his desk. “But when there is overwhelming evidence that contradicts your beliefs, I think you should admit it.

“Mark, I believe your opinion that the death of Lynol Brinkstan was a murder is unsubstantiated,” said Captain Evert firmly. “I hope you’ll change your mind and go along with the rest of this department in our determination that the death was accidental. Some of our friends from the press are beginning to get wind of your opinion and are questioning our unity.”

Mark threw his hands out, palms up. “Sorry, captain. I calls them like I sees them.”

“Well, I think you’re wrong in this case,” said Evert. He slipped his glasses on and picked up some reports on his desk.

“Before you open your mouth and put your foot in it,” he continued, “allow me to give you all the latest information from a few of the *other* experts who work in this precinct.”

He peered over the top of his glasses. “I bet you didn’t even

know we have others working here, did you?”

Mark flashed a confident grin. “Gosh, captain. You really know how to hurt a guy,” he replied.

Evert ignored the comment and began paraphrasing the reports. “Let’s see . . . Lynol B. Brinkstan, a successful television writer, was found dead in his smashed car at the bottom of the Glen Valley Gorge at one forty A.M. on Tuesday by an early morning commuter who called on his car phone. He reported some headlights and a horn blowing near the side of a road that runs through the bottom of the gorge.

“Further investigation by police found skidmarks and a break in a wood barrier on Glen Valley Drive, a winding road about ninety feet above the spot where the car struck the valley floor. The skid imprints match the tire patterns of Lynol’s smashed car.

“The late model two door sedan was severely damaged. It was lying upside down at the bottom of the gorge with its roof completely flattened. Fortunately, there was no fire. The accident scene was totally preserved.”

Evert glanced up to see a faint trace of a smile on Mark’s face.

"Okay, wiseguy," said the captain, "listen carefully. The ignition switch was on. The transmission was in 'drive.' The headlight switch was on. The radio was on low volume. He had his seat belt on and the air bag deployed, but to no avail.

"The engine quit from damage due to the force of the impact. The battery survived, leaving the lights and radio on. The horn had shorted and was blaring loudly. This led to the relatively rapid discovery of the car by the commuter. The victim's watch was damaged and is believed to have stopped at the time of the accident. It indicated one seventeen A.M.

"Everything clearly indicates that the victim lost control of his car, slammed through the barrier, and died when his car hit the ground below. The skidmarks went right to the edge of the dropoff. Want to tell me how a murderer could manage that?"

"Well..." began Mark.

"Just let me finish," interrupted Evert. "The victim suffered severe head and body injuries. The coroner places the time of death at a little after one A.M. on Tuesday. There were no drugs or alcohol in the victim's blood. The coroner is absolutely certain the victim died from the massive trauma

suffered when the car struck the valley floor. He was even able to identify many of the interior parts of the car that inflicted various fatal wounds. In other words, Lynol was alive just before the accident.

"Ann Brinkstan, the victim's mother, states that her son often took late night drives to listen to the radio and relax... and to come up with new ideas for TV scripts for the shows he worked on. She says that sometimes his daydreaming would become so intense, he would often drift across the center line of the highway or onto the shoulder. Apparently she had been riding with her son on previous occasions when his driving had become erratic, and she had warned him about how dangerous his daydreaming was.

"She also confirms that her son did not drink and that the station the car radio was tuned to was one of his favorites."

Captain Evert and Mark stared at each other for a few seconds.

"Done?" asked Mark.

"Done. Your turn."

"You are, of course, aware that Lynol Brinkstan had a restriction on his license. He had poor vision and had to wear either his contact lenses or his glasses to be able to drive."

Evert smiled and waved him off. "Nice try. Brinkstan was wearing the one pair of glasses he owned when he died. They were found next to his body at the accident scene. His contacts were at home on a shelf in the bathroom."

"Did you check to see if there were contacts in the eyes of the victim or at the scene?"

"Come on, Mark," chided Evert. "You know darn well we did. His contacts were never involved. All his contact lenses were accounted for and were at his house . . . over a half hour's drive away. Only his glasses were missing from the house, of course, because he was wearing them. His mother confirms that her son always wore his glasses when he went on his late night drives. He only wore his contacts when he went out in public."

"I gather there are no witnesses to Brinkstan's leaving his house or to the accident itself," said Mark.

"Lynol Brinkstan lived alone. No one saw him after six P.M. on Monday night, and no one witnessed the accident itself. But that doesn't make it a murder, for Pete's sake."

"Are you going to ignore the three men who had a strong motive for wanting Lynol out of the way?"

"Of course not," said Evert. "But that doesn't mean any of them killed him."

Mark held up three fingers. "Jesse Givens was written out of a lucrative job on one of the daytime television soaps scripted by Lynol Brinkstan. At his age, he was unable to land another acting job and had to take a menial job in a restaurant. He swore he'd get even with Lynol."

He then held up two fingers. "Miles Hendricks was successfully sued by Brinkstan for plagiarism. Besides the fact that Miles lost a bundle of money, there isn't a production studio in the country that will hire him now. Miles was a little more explicit than Jesse. He was overheard by witnesses claiming he'd kill Brinkstan if he got the chance."

Then one finger. "And finally we have Phillip Martin, Lynol's older stepbrother. With a taste for fast expensive cars and faster expensive women, he just barely manages to stay one step ahead of collection and repossession agencies. Lynol's will leaves the bulk of his substantial estate to be split between Phillip and Ann, his mother."

"They all claim they're innocent," replied the captain lamely.

"Surprise, surprise. Do any of the three have alibis?"

"You could hardly expect them to. They all say they were home asleep in bed like most *normal* people would be at one in the morning," said Evert defensively. "Honestly, Mark. Did anyone ever explain the theory behind 'innocent until *proven* guilty' to you?"

Mark pulled a phone book off the top of Evert's desk and began idly to leaf through it.

"Well, well, well," said a grinning Evert as he rose from his chair and sat down on the front corner of his desk. "Have we nothing more to say? Are you ready to admit that this could only have been an accident and there is no *real* proof of a murder?"

Mark had found a place in the yellow pages and was running his finger down the entries on the page.

"Kelly's, Mark," said Evert, rising to fetch his hat and coat from the rack. "I'll take two . . . tall . . . cold ones. On you, of course."

"Hold up a sec," said Mark. "I have to call a lawyer."

"A lawyer? What do you need a lawyer for?"

Mark looked up. "Who's going to defend me for false arrest?"

"Good heavens," gasped Evert. "You've arrested someone?"

"Yeah. And I've charged him with the first degree murder of Lynol Brinkstan."

"Oh no," sighed Evert, returning and falling back into his chair. "What possible proof do you have?"

"Just this," said Mark, reaching into his jacket, removing a medium-sized envelope, and putting it on the desk. "Go ahead and open it."

Evert opened the envelope and removed a pair of dark-framed glasses. "Where'd you get these?"

Mark grinned. "Try them on."

A confused captain took off his own glasses and put the glasses from the envelope on instead.

"They're . . . they're *mine*."

"You sure?"

"Of course I'm sure," said Evert firmly. "I have an unusual prescription. It would be nearly impossible for anyone else to have it."

"Okay, I confess," said Mark. "They *are* yours. I stole them out of your desk drawer."

Evert pulled out the top right-hand drawer on his desk. His glasses case was there, but his spare glasses were missing.

The captain shook his head as if to clear it. "I don't get it. *My* glasses are *your* proof?"

Mark stood up, walked to the coat rack, and returned with Evert's coat and hat.

"Kelly's, captain," he replied, doing a really bad imitation of Evert. "I'll take two . . . tall . . . cold ones. On you, of course."

Evert sighed deeply and then stood up to take the hat and coat.

"I'm driving," said Mark.

"Driving? Kelly's is a half a block. Why the heck . . ."

"I want to show you something first."

They went down to the police garage. Captain Evert climbed into Mark's car while Mark looked around at the other cars and checked for pedestrians in the lot. Then he climbed into the car with Evert.

"Buckle up," said Mark as he started the engine and backed out of his parking space.

"Where are we going?" asked Evert.

Mark continued to back up to the far end of the garage. "Nowhere. You ready?"

"Ready? Ready for what?"

Mark stomped the gas pedal to the floor, and the tires squealed loudly as they fought for traction. The car rapidly accelerated toward the wall at the far end of the garage.

"You crazy? You're fired!" shouted Evert in a panic.

"Watch," said Mark.

He released the gas pedal and yanked the parking brake lever up hard. While the tires

screamed as the car began to skid, Mark opened his door. The car finally stopped a few yards from the wall.

"Damn! Where's my baseball bat when I need it?" yelled the captain.

Mark was already out the door and standing over his handiwork. Evert stumbled from the car and began searching for a heavy blunt object.

"See?" said Mark, pointing at the garage floor. "Skidmarks. And I had plenty of time to jump from the car before it stopped."

Evert calmed down and walked over to look at the marks. "Or before it would have gone over a sharp drop-off," added Evert. "But the parking brake was off at the accident scene."

Mark shrugged. "The killer wanted to create skidmarks on the road to produce convincing evidence that the death was an accident. He knew he would have to drive down to the lower road at the bottom of the gorge to release the parking brake on the smashed car."

"So what?" said Evert. "All you've done is show that someone *could* have staged the accident. You still haven't proved it was murder."

"That information will cost you," said Mark, getting back into his car to repark it. Evert

stood and waited, vowing never to climb into the passenger seat of a car driven by *that* detective ever again.

Their table at Kelly's was empty as usual in spite of the crowd. Mark settled into his chair while Captain Evert bought the drinks and carried them over on a tray.

"What's that in the small glass?" asked Mark as the captain sat down.

"Whisky. To help settle my nerves."

"Nerves? Why would you be nervous?" asked Mark innocently.

"Never mind," said Evert.

Mark downed two large swallows of beer while Evert tossed back the whisky and checked his hand to see if he was still shaking.

"Okay, so let's hear the rest of it," he said.

"It was the glasses found at the scene of the so-called accident," began Mark. "They weren't Lynol Brinkstan's glasses."

"How could you be certain?"

"I wasn't, at first," replied Mark. "But I knew if his vision was poor his glasses should have been fairly thick and the correction powerful. So I put them on and discovered what I had already suspected."

"The glasses weren't thick, nor was the prescription very

powerful. The crime lab later verified that fact. They turned out to be a pair of inexpensive reading glasses like those anyone can buy at the drugstore."

"I don't understand," replied Evert. "How did a pair of reading glasses end up at the accident . . . ah, murder scene?"

"That's better," said Mark, grinning. "Let's imagine how the murder might have taken place."

"First, the killer must hide a getaway car somewhere near the spot where he plans to stage the accident. This could be done any time prior to the killing. Afterward, he could walk, hitch a ride, or, most likely, use a bicycle to go to Lynol Brinkstan's house and hide."

"Then he simply waits until late at night to enter the house and render the sleeping Lynol unconscious with a sharp blow to the head. He dresses him and takes him out to the passenger seat of Brinkstan's sedan. He loads up the bike and sets out. A short distance from the winding turn at the top of the gorge, he removes the bike from the car, turns on the radio, and puts Lynol, still unconscious, in the driver's seat. He even buckles up his victim's seat belt; all the things he believes Lynol does when he drives. Now comes the tricky part."

"He climbs into the passenger side, leaving his door unlatched, puts the car into 'drive,' and presses the gas pedal down. As the car builds up speed, heading for the wooden barrier at the top of the gorge, the killer pulls on the parking brake to create the skidmarks and jumps from the car just before it crashes through the barrier and down into the gorge.

"Now the killer must hurry. The lights of the smashed sedan are still on, and the horn is blaring loudly. It's sure to attract attention. He puts the bike into his nearby getaway car and races down to the lower road to Brinkstan's car to release the brake.

"Sometime during the process of staging the accident, the killer suddenly realizes he has made a terrible mistake. He remembers that Lynol must wear either glasses or contact lenses in order to see to drive."

"Of course. That makes sense," agreed Evert. "Like his mother said, Lynol normally wore his contacts only when he was out in public, so the killer didn't notice immediately that his victim looked any different without his glasses on. Since he had been in bed asleep, he probably had removed his contacts."

"Correct," said Mark. "So maybe the killer checks and discovers his victim does not have his contacts in. Perhaps he doublechecks Lynol's driver's license to verify the restriction.

"Whatever, the killer realizes that if the police don't find contact lenses in Lynol's eyes, or at least his eyeglasses nearby, they'll realize the crash was no accident."

"Couldn't he just turn off the lights and shut off the horn so he would have enough time to go back for the glasses?"

"He could turn off the lights with the switch," replied Mark. "But if the car were discovered while he was away, the police would have additional proof that the death of Lynol was no accident. No one drives around at one in the morning with his lights out.

"Besides, remember that the blowing horn was due to a short. With the car upside down and smashed flat, the killer couldn't open the hood to try to disconnect it from the battery.

"Suddenly, the killer has a brilliant idea. He takes his own reading glasses and throws them into the car next to the body of Lynol. With luck, no one will notice the difference, since few people have seen

Brinkstan in his glasses anyway.

"If he's *really* lucky, he realizes he *still* might be able to get back to Brinkstan's house, retrieve the real glasses, return to the murder scene, and swap them with his own reading glasses before anyone discovers the car and body."

"Didn't happen," noted Evert.

"Right," agreed Mark, taking a quick swig of beer. "The commuter called at one forty, twenty-three minutes after Lynol's watch stopped. The police arrived and taped off the area eight minutes later. That's a total of thirty-one minutes. It's at least thirty minutes each way to Brinkstan's house. The killer couldn't have made it in time.

"Of course, there was still a chance no one would notice that the glasses at the crash site were just reading glasses, and they would eventually be returned to the victim's mother.

"In any case, he knew he would have to go back to Brinkstan's house and take the prescription glasses so they wouldn't be found by the police when they checked the house."

"Well then," said Evert. "Since we still have the reading glasses, you should be able to name the killer, right? Whose reading glasses were they?"

Mark laughed. "You're going to love this. There's no way of telling. All three suspects wear drugstore reading glasses that are about the same strength."

"You're kidding. The good guys never get lucky, do they?"

"It doesn't matter. I figured out a way to trick the murderer into revealing himself when I interviewed each of the three suspects."

"Let me guess," said the captain. "You called each of them in turn into the interrogation room and had them try to read some very small print on a document to see which one didn't have his reading glasses."

Mark just shook his head and chuckled. "Come on, captain. Do you think a killer smart enough to plan this murder wouldn't have been clever enough to buy a replacement pair of reading glasses by now?"

"I suppose you're right. So how *did* you trick the murderer into confessing?"

Mark polished off the first beer and pushed the empty aside. "I called each of the suspects and scheduled them for a separate interview in that empty office down at the end of the hall on our floor."

"Why that place?" asked Evert. "That office doesn't have any video and audio monitoring in it. There's not even a one-

way mirror in it to observe the suspect."

"Hang on," said Mark, gesturing for patience. "You'll understand in a second."

"The main thing you need to know is that when I called each of the suspects on the phone, I also said I wanted him to help identify some personal belongings of the deceased Mr. Lynol Brinkstan that were taken from the crash scene."

"When I got Brinkstan's personal items from the evidence room, I removed the reading glasses that the killer had left at the murder scene and put your glasses in their place."

"Why did you do that?" asked Evert.

"I've seen your glasses many times," said Mark. "The reading glasses and your prescription glasses are nearly identical. I had to be absolutely certain that the glasses in the personal items seen by the suspects could be absolutely identified later."

"Again why?"

Mark leaned forward in his chair. "Because during each interview I spread the personal items out on the table and just as I asked the suspect to identify the items as belonging to Lynol Brinkstan, officer Gale Watts entered the room on cue and told me there was an im-

portant phone call waiting for me."

"So you left each suspect alone in the room with Brinkstan's personal items," said Evert, showing signs of comprehension. "Since you told each of them they were going to identify his personal items, you knew the murderer would bring Brinkstan's real glasses along on the chance he could swap them with the reading glasses."

"Exactly," replied Mark. "And I gave him that chance when I left the room."

"No cameras, no one-way mirrors..."

"Right. I didn't want the murderer to be concerned that he might be observed making the switch."

"When I returned, if I saw that the glasses on the table weren't yours, I knew I had my murderer. Just to be certain, I ran the glasses left behind on the table down to the lab shortly after the interview and had Brinkstan's prescription verified."

"You're a bloody genius," roared Evert. "Who was the murderer?"

"Your favorite restaurant waiter and mine, Jesse Givens," said Mark, saluting with his mug of beer. "I can understand why Brinkstan wrote

him out of the soap. He's a terrible actor."

"Why? What happened?"

"When Gale stopped him in the hall with the search warrant," said Mark, grinning, "and removed *your* glasses from *his* pocket, Givens

snatched them from her hand and put them on. He *insisted* they were his reading glasses. Then he turned and walked into the janitor's closet."

"Hey, you two," yelled Kelly, from behind the bar. "Youse quit laughing so loud. You're disturbing my other clienteles."

THE MYSTERIOUS PHOTOGRAPH



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Why would twenty-three penguins cross the road? We will give a prize of \$25 to the person who invents the best mystery story (in 250 words or less, and be sure to include a crime), based on the above photograph. The story will be printed in a future issue. Reply to Alfred Hitchcock Mystery Magazine, 1540 Broadway, New York, New York 10036. Please label your entry "October Contest," and be sure your name and address are written on the story you submit.

The winning entry for the May Mysterious Photograph contest will be found on page 157.

FICTION

Murder in the Vestry

C. M. Chan



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"Damn," said Phillip Bethancourt, squinting at the clock on the nightstand. He picked it up and shook it dubiously, as if this might change what it was telling him. It did not. "Damn," he said again, more forcefully, and replaced it. "Marla," he said. "Wake up."

Marla Tate, a top fashion model and Bethancourt's girlfriend, stirred sleepily beside him.

"Mmm," she said.

Bethancourt shook her shoulder and then reached for his glasses, shaking a lock of fair hair out of his eyes. "Marla," he said, "we've overslept. Wake up."

"What?" she asked groggily, opening a jade green eye.

Bethancourt swung out of bed and grabbed his heavy silk dressing gown. "Aubrey's wedding, remember?" he said. "We've got half an hour before we have to leave."

"What?" said Marla, sharply this time. She sat up, pushing coppery hair back from her face, and glared at the clock.

"I'll turn on the coffee," said Bethancourt, and left before she could transfer her glare to him.

She was in the bathroom when he returned, standing naked over the sink and scrub-

bing furiously at her teeth with a toothbrush.

"I can't believe you did this to me," she said around a mouthful of toothpaste.

"It's not my fault," responded Bethancourt, reaching for his own toothbrush. "The alarm didn't go off. And you were the one who wanted to stay so late at that party last night."

Marla rinsed her mouth and spat. "We should have skipped the party and motored down to Surrey last night."

Since Bethancourt had originally suggested this, only to have the idea rejected by Marla, he said nothing. He stuck his toothbrush in his mouth and tried to remember what a truly splendid time they had had at the party the night before. Usually he felt that Marla's mercurial temper was a small price to pay for times like that; moreover, he rather enjoyed the challenge of manipulating her out of her moods. But he was not at his best first thing in the morning. He finished cleaning his teeth and turned on the shower.

"You cannot possibly mean to shower first," said Marla coldly.

"Well, of course I'm going to shower before I dress," retorted Bethancourt, who was feeling the lack of sleep. "Oh," he added as Marla stared coolly at

him, "I see. Well, we'll just have to share—there's no time for anything else."

Marla continued to glare while he defiantly stripped off his dressing gown and stepped beneath the water.

Some twenty minutes later Bethancourt, with barely half a cup of coffee inside him, was knotting his tie. He was particularly anxious not to be late, as Aubrey Fields had asked him to be an usher and, aware of Bethancourt's propensity for tardiness, had made him promise to be on time. Bethancourt and Fields had been at prep school and then at Oxford together, but like many childhood friendships, theirs had waned a little with the passing years, so Bethancourt was rather touched to be asked.

Perhaps his anxiety not to let his friend down was enough to explain what happened next, or perhaps it was the lack of coffee that was at fault. On a normal morning, Bethancourt would have spent an hour sipping two cups and reading the paper. In any case, he had been dating Marla for long enough to know better than to issue any kind of ultimatum.

"Marla," he said, shrugging into the jacket of his grey suit, "are you almost ready?"

"No." It was a flat statement.

"Well, couldn't you put on your dress and finish your makeup in the car?"

"No."

"Look here," said Bethancourt, making a last effort, "I'm not going to be much good as an usher if we get there after everyone's already seated, am I? Be reasonable, love."

"I am being reasonable," said Marla in a frigid tone. "My hair's not even dry yet. If you wanted to be on time, you should have given me more than thirty minutes to get ready in."

"Fine," snapped Bethancourt, with a rare display of temper. "I am going to walk Cerberus around the block, after which I shall pick up the car and bring it round. If you're not there, I shall go without you."

He turned on his heel and left the flat without waiting to hear her reply.

He was rather surprised, after giving the borzoi an abbreviated version of his morning walk and then bundling the dog into the back of the Jaguar, to find Marla waiting when he drove up. Of course, she really had no choice if she intended to go to the wedding, but since these were Bethancourt's friends rather than hers, he would have expected her to skip it.

He tried to make amends on the fast and furious drive down to Surrey, but Marla, intent on the difficult task of applying makeup in a speeding car, refused to even continue the fight, much less be conciliated.

The stone church was set in an isolated, if pretty, spot. Bethancourt shot past it into the car park, separated from the church by a thick cluster of lilacs, and pulled into the first available space. As he leapt out, abandoning Marla to make her own way, he saw a tall, slender figure with broad shoulders and dark gold hair running ahead of him at full tilt. Recognizing this as Rick Askew, a fellow Oxonian and usher, he called out.

"Christ," panted Askew as Bethancourt came up, "are you just arriving, too? Aubrey will kill us."

"This wedding is jinxed," muttered Bethancourt as they ran on, careening around the edge of the lilacs and up the path to arrive, gasping, in front of the church.

There was a large crowd in pastel colors mingling on the church steps in the June sunshine, with poor Giles Porter, the third usher, doing his best to get them into the church. Aubrey Fields was moving among them, a dazed smile on his pleasant, bony face, but he

moved to meet Bethancourt and Askew as they came up.

"Oh, there you are," he said, a little vaguely. "I was beginning to think none of you but Giles was going to turn up."

"I'm most awfully sorry, Aubrey," said Bethancourt.

"It was my car," said Askew.

"Bob hasn't turned up," said Fields. "He was motoring down from York this morning—I do hope he hasn't had an accident."

Since Bob Peterson was to be the best man, this news left Bethancourt and Askew momentarily speechless.

"York? I thought he was flying in from China," said Askew.

"No, no," said Aubrey. "He got back last Wednesday but couldn't make it down for the rehearsal."

"China?" said Bethancourt, momentarily distracted. "What on earth was he doing there?"

"His father's expanding his business over there," explained Askew. "Bob's been spending a lot of time in Beijing one way or the other."

"It'll be all right," continued Fields. "My father will step in for him if he doesn't show. But I'm awfully worried that he's lying unconscious in hospital somewhere."

"Surely not," said Askew. "He's probably just had a

breakdown in some isolated spot."

"That's right," said Bethancourt. "You'll see—he'll either ring up or appear halfway through the reception."

They were interrupted by Giles Porter, who pushed past a large, lavender-clad lady and glared at them. His round face was rather red, and the thin hair on top of his pate had been blown awry by the wind.

"Are you two going to help or not?" he demanded, and then sneezed violently. "Oh God," he said, "it's all these damn flowers." He produced a handkerchief well-smeared with dirt and what looked like a streak of oil, and turned it over in search of a clean spot.

"Here," said Askew, pulling out his own handkerchief while Bethancourt groped in his pocket and found that he had somehow forgotten his in the morning rush. "Have mine."

"Thank you," said Porter. "I'm afraid I had some car trouble this morning..."

"Jinxed," muttered Bethancourt under his breath.

Porter blew his nose forcefully.

"We'd better get on with it," said Askew, moving into the crowd.

"Right." Bethancourt turned to follow him.

"Wait a minute, Giles," said Fields. "You've got a smear on your nose." He produced his own handkerchief and scrubbed at Porter's nose.

"At least the groom's got a clean handkerchief," said Bethancourt. "Come on, Giles."

"There you are, Phillip," said Jack Gibbons, who had shown his acumen earlier in the week by firmly refusing to ride down with Bethancourt and Marla. Experience had taught him that they were always late and that their tempers tended to fray in the early morning. "We've all been milling about for at least ten minutes—when do we get to go in?"

"Right now," said Bethancourt promptly, and led the way.

Bit by bit, the wedding guests were assembled in their places. Bethancourt saw Marla being escorted by Rick Askew, but she pointedly ignored him, turning her full attention on Askew, who did not seem to mind. The bridal party arrived and had to be shunted off to wait in the car park until the rest of the guests were got into the church. Aubrey and his father disappeared in the direction of the vestry. Bethancourt ushered in a group of latecomers and then arrayed himself with Askew and Porter to the right of the nave below the

altar. The vicar, a Mr. Clerkenwell, came in, followed by the Fieldses, father and son. The first of the bridesmaids started down the aisle. She had not been at the rehearsal, and Bethancourt nudged Porter to ask who she was.

"Rennie Howland," Porter whispered back. "Quite a looker, eh?"

"Oh, brave new world," murmured Bethancourt. "But Howland? Isn't she Oriental?"

"Mother's side," said Porter.

Rennie Howland looked like a porcelain china doll with her shining cap of black hair and long, almond eyes above a delicate complexion. She was tiny and slender, and the bridesmaid's gown, in pale gold, became her. Bethancourt was gratified to realize he would be escorting her down the aisle at the end of the ceremony.

At last Allyson Whytecliff, a vision in white lace, appeared on her father's arm. Aubrey Fields began to grin idiotically, and Porter muffled a sneeze.

The rest of the ceremony went according to plan. Aubrey and Allyson were pronounced man and wife, exchanged a chaste kiss, and led the way back down the nave. Bethancourt linked arms with the beautiful Rennie Howland, who smiled up at him, a long, slow smile. They followed Por-

ter and another bridesmaid, and Bethancourt did not bother to look for Marla as he passed. In fact, he offered Rennie a ride to the reception.

"That would be fine," she said. "I rented a car, but it's over at the Fieldses'—the wedding party all came in one car, you see."

"Oh dear," said Fields as he was helping his bride into the Volvo Estate. "I've left my raincoat in the vestry."

"Raincoat?" said Bethancourt, raising an eyebrow and glancing up at the clear blue sky.

"It was drizzling this morning," said Fields defensively.

"Never mind," said Bethancourt. "I'll get it and bring it along. Off you go now." He stepped back from the car and turned to find Rennie Howland waiting for him while the rest of the bridal party wandered off toward the car park.

"I've got to run back to the vestry," he told her. "Aubrey's left something behind."

She glanced lazily behind her to where the first of the guests were emerging from the church. "I'll go with you," she said, taking his arm again. "I don't want to get caught here."

Still, she did not hurry as they followed the path round the corner of the church to the vestry door. In fact, she was

slow and deliberate in all her movements, and even her speech was clear and unhurried. It made a contrast with the mischievous sparkle in her black eyes, and Bethancourt was finding the combination difficult to resist. He found himself being more than usually solicitous as he helped her up the steps of the vestry porch and ushered her inside.

The vestry was a long room that looked as though it had been furnished in the Victorian era and not touched since. The two windows were draped with dark red velveteen trimmed with gold fringe and tied back with gold silk cords with heavy tassels. There were two massive dark cupboards, elaborately carved and presumably filled with ecclesiastical supplies; and a large table with bulbous clawed feet at the far end of the room. A jumble of uncomfortable-looking straight-backed chairs surrounded it, while an altar cloth was thrown carelessly over its middle and trailed down to the floor. A door at the opposite end led to the sacristy, and beside the door into the church stood a small table with two large brass candlesticks and a raincoat on it.

"There we are," said Bethancourt, seizing the garment.

"Hello?" came a startled voice from the sacristy, and the vicar peered in.

"It's just us, Mr. Clerkenwell," said Bethancourt cheerfully. "Aubrey forgot his raincoat."

"It was a lovely ceremony," added Rennie as Mr. Clerkenwell blinked in an effort to remember their names.

"Well, thank you, my dear," he said, coming into the vestry and revealing himself to be still half-clothed in his official robes. "I don't believe you were at the rehearsal."

"So sorry," said Bethancourt. "Mr. Clerkenwell, Rennie Howland."

They shook hands, and Mr. Clerkenwell murmured something about looking forward to the reception.

"We should leave you to finish changing," Bethancourt was saying when a short, stout woman in blue bustled in and then drew up at the sight of the gathering.

"My wife," said Clerkenwell. "Dear, this is Phillip Bethancourt and Rennie Howland, from the wedding party."

They all shook hands and murmured various pleasant-ries about the wedding and the bride and groom. Then Mrs. Clerkenwell's eye strayed to the far end of the room.

"Heavens," she said. "What's that doing there? John, have you been shifting the altar clothes about?"

"What?" said the vicar, taken aback. "No, no. Certainly not." He peered nearsightedly at his wife as she marched purposefully toward the table and reached for the cloth.

"Well," said Bethancourt, throwing the raincoat over his shoulder and taking Rennie's elbow, "we should go. They'll be waiting for us for the receiving line, and—"

He was cut off by Mrs. Clerk-enwell, who uttered a short, sharp, and very piercing scream. They all turned to stare at her. She was clutching the linen to her chest and staring down, horrified, at the dead man beneath the table.

Detective Sergeant Jack Gibbons, not having a car of his own, had come down by train the night before and had been conveyed to the church by Clarissa Benton, another friend from Oxford who was staying at the same inn as himself. He had lost track of her in the crowd after the ceremony and had just found her again when Bethancourt appeared at his side, looking rather pale.

"Jack," he said, grabbing his friend's arm. "Come with me."

"We were just heading for the reception," protested Gibbons.

"Clarissa, you remember Phillip, don't you?"

"Of course," she began.

"How splendid to see you," interrupted Bethancourt. "I need to borrow Jack for a minute—you go on ahead. Oh, and if you wouldn't mind, tell Aubrey to start the receiving line without us. Come on, Jack."

"Now, wait a minute," said Gibbons, but Bethancourt merely tightened his grip on his arm and dragged him off.

"Phillip—"

"It's Bob Peterson," said Bethancourt as they rounded the corner of the church. "We've found him dead in the vestry."

"What?" exclaimed Gibbons, considerably startled.

"At least I think it's him—he looks awful. His face is all purple and bloated."

Thus encouraged, Gibbons ceased all resistance and ran for the vestry door. Inside, the vicar had taken his wife to sit down in the sacristy, but Rennie was still on guard, clutching both her bouquet and Fields's raincoat, the sparkle in her eyes quenched. Gibbons went at once to the body while Bethancourt and Rennie hovered at the other end of the room looking on.

"Strangled," said Gibbons shortly. He rose and began to examine the floor carefully.

"Has anyone rung the police yet?"

"I don't know," answered Bethancourt, moving to the door of the sacristy. "Mr. Clerkenwell? Have you rung the police?"

"No," answered the vicar. "I thought I'd wait for your friend. Oh, is that you, Mr., er, Detective . . ."

"Jack Gibbons," said Gibbons firmly, coming forward and shaking hands. "Is there a telephone here?"

"Oh yes," replied Mr. Clerkenwell. "If you'd just come in here . . ."

"Let's step outside," said Bethancourt to Rennie. "I can't help looking at him, and I don't want to."

"I know," she agreed feelingly. "And it's silly, but I'm beginning to imagine a smell."

Bethancourt shuddered. "Then by all means," he said.

Outside, the day was still bright and shining, mocking what lay in the vestry. Bethancourt leant against the porch railing and lit a cigarette. Rennie threw the raincoat over the railing, laid her bouquet on the floor, and joined him, rummaging in her purse for a battered packet of Gitanes. She was very subdued, and her hands shook as she produced a plastic lighter and cupped her hand around the small flame.

"Did you know him well?" she asked, exhaling.

"No," answered Bethancourt, "not really. Aubrey met him at Oxford, but I never knew him terribly well, and I don't think I've seen him since we came down. Had you met him?"

Rennie shook her head, setting her dark hair swinging. "No. I feel almost guilty about it now. I mean, he was supposed to be part of the wedding with the rest of us, and I should feel sad, but I don't."

"Think about how Aubrey and Allyson are going to feel when the police invade their reception, and maybe you will," said Bethancourt.

Rennie gasped and looked up at him. "Oh no," she said. "They can't."

"I'm sorry," said Bethancourt. "I shouldn't have said that. I'm a bit upset—bodies always affect me that way."

"Then the police won't interrupt the reception?" she asked.

Bethancourt looked down at her. Behind his glasses, his hazel eyes were bleak. "Oh yes," he said. "I'm afraid so."

"Oh Lord."

The door opened, and Gibbons came out. "They're on the way," he said. He looked at the cigarette between Bethancourt's fingers. "Were you smoking in there?" he asked.

"Of course not," answered Bethancourt indignantly. "I know better than that."

"Neither was I," chimed in Rennie. "We've only just lit up."

"That's good," said Gibbons, examining the floorboards of the porch. "I saw some ash on the floor in there and a burnt match, but no cigarette end. Yes, here it is."

"Phillip says the police will interrupt the reception," said Rennie.

Gibbons looked up at her from where he was crouched over the cigarette end. His blue eyes were emotionless. "That's right," he said evenly. "I'm sorry for it, but this is obviously a case of murder. I'm sure they'll be as discreet as they can."

Rennie sighed but said nothing.

Gibbons straightened. "I can't remember," he said. "Did Bob smoke?"

"I'm afraid I never met him," said Rennie apologetically.

"I'm not sure," said Bethancourt thoughtfully. "There was a night in a pub . . . no, I can't bring it into focus."

"Never mind," said Gibbons. "I'm going back in and look around before the locals arrive. Care to come?"

"Certainly," said Bethancourt. "Just let me put this out far from the scene of the crime.

The churchyard should do admirably."

He swung off the porch and trotted out among the grave-stones while Rennie stared after him. Gibbons smiled.

"Didn't he tell you he's my shadow?" he said.

"Really?" Rennie looked at him doubtfully.

"Really," said Gibbons. "He doesn't like the gory details, but otherwise he can't keep his hands off any case I'm working on. My governor even lets him come along on interviews."

Rennie sighed delicately, as if it all were a bit much to assimilate. "I didn't even know you investigated murders," she said. "Are you an inspector?"

"No," grinned Gibbons. "Only a lowly sergeant."

"All set," said Bethancourt, coming back. "Tell me something, Rennie, and please be absolutely honest."

She turned to face him, clearly bracing herself for whatever question might be coming. "I'll try," she said.

"How do you feel about dogs?"

Rennie's almond eyes opened wide. "Dogs?" she repeated in amazement.

"Large ones," said Bethancourt.

She burst out laughing. "I like dogs," she said, "especially large ones. Why on earth . . ."

"Then would you mind giving mine a walk? He's in the car, and he didn't get much of a walk this morning."

"I'll be glad to," she said, smiling. "It'll be better to have something to do. In the car park?"

"That's right," said Bethancourt. "It's a grey Jaguar and the lead's in the glove box. His name's Cerberus."

Rennie, stepping daintily off the porch, turned back and raised an eyebrow. "Cerberus?"

"I read classics at Oxford," explained Bethancourt. "Thank you."

She waved in answer, and he turned to follow Gibbons inside.

"A very pretty lady," commented Gibbons slyly. "Has Marla met her yet?"

Bethancourt made a face. "I lost my temper with Marla this morning," he admitted. "I don't think we're speaking at the moment. At least that's the impression I got."

"Ah," said Gibbons, "then that explains why she went off with Rick Askew."

"Did she?" said Bethancourt. "Oh dear, I am in trouble. He's awfully goodlooking, don't you think?"

"I suppose so," said Gibbons, losing interest and bending to examine the bottom of one of the cupboards. "Look here," he

went on, pointing to a scrape on the old wood. "This looks fresh." He cast a glance back at the corpse. "I wish I could get a better look at his shoes."

"You think he was killed in here, then?"

"It looks rather like it," said Gibbons cautiously. "You see there's a slight damp patch on the floor here—I can just get a whiff of urine from it, I think."

"Urine?" said Bethancourt with a faint look of distaste.

"Well, his bladder would have let loose when he was strangled," explained Gibbons.

"Oh dear . . ."

"What I don't see," went on Gibbons, firmly ignoring his friend's squeamishness, "is whatever he was strangled with. Unless he's lying on it," he added with another glance at the corpse.

"Don't worry," said Bethancourt soothingly. "The local police will be here any minute and look for you. So what was that about cigarette ash?"

"Over there," said Gibbons, pointing. "It doesn't mean much if it was Bob's—in that case, he probably lit one in here and then moved out to the porch to finish it. But if it's the murderer's, then there's the possibility of a DNA trace from that end out there."

"I see," said Bethancourt. He too glanced back at the body

huddled beneath the table. "God," he said suddenly, "this is horrible. There's Bob, all mucked about—"

"Phillip," said Gibbons calmly.

"Sorry," said Bethancourt. "I think perhaps I'd better wait outside after all."

"All right," agreed Gibbons. "I'll stay here. I don't want to leave Mr. Clerkenwell with access," he added, lowering his voice.

Bethancourt stopped, startled. "The *vicar*?" he asked.

"Shhh." Gibbons shrugged. "I don't really think so, but he was here early, before anyone else."

"Yes, of course. All right, I'll show the police round here as soon as they arrive."

They were not much longer in coming. Very shortly they had taken over the vestry and sacristy and were interviewing the Clerkenwells and Gibbons in the church. Bethancourt and Rennie awaited their turn on the church steps with Cerberus at their feet. But it was still a good forty-five minutes before a large, red-faced man approached them. His hair was thinning on top, and his grey eyes were as expressionless as pebbles on the seashore.

"Mr. Bethancourt, Miss Howland?" he said. "I'm Detective Chief Inspector Neel. I under-

stand you were present when the body was found?"

They assented to this and described what had happened. Neel nodded noncommittally when they had done.

"Now, if you could tell me where you were this morning?"

"I motored down from London," volunteered Bethancourt. "I was a bit late starting out—overslept, I'm afraid. My girlfriend was with me."

"Is that right, miss?"

A smile tugged at the corner of Rennie's mouth. "I'm not his girlfriend," she said.

"Her name is Marla Tate," said Bethancourt. "She went ahead to the reception before the body was found."

"I see," said Neel. "And what time did you meet her this morning?"

"She had stayed the night at my flat," replied Bethancourt. "We both dressed and left from there."

Neel nodded. "And you, Miss Howland?"

"I'm staying at the Mill Pond Inn," she said. "I had breakfast in my room there and then went over to the Whytecliffs' house to dress. I was one of the bridesmaids, you see."

"Thank you," said Neel. "You're free to go for the moment, then. However, if you go to the reception, I do not want you to speak of the murder. To

anyone. You might say that Mr. Clerkenwell was taken ill if you need an excuse." He fixed them with a stern eye. "I have been told, Mr. Bethancourt, that Scotland Yard will vouch for you, which is why I'm willing to trust your discretion. Miss Howland I am taking on faith. I want it clearly understood that if I get to that reception and find out you've been talking, I will not hesitate to arrest you on charges of obstruction of justice."

"Yes, sir," said Bethancourt mildly, but behind his glasses his hazel eyes had hardened. "We understand perfectly. I give you my word not to say anything."

"Neither will I," said Rennie.

"Good. I'll see you later then." And Neel disappeared back into the church.

"I don't think I like him much," said Rennie as the door closed behind him.

"No," agreed Bethancourt. "If he's so bloody reassured by what Scotland Yard says about me, then why does he need to threaten me with obstruction of justice?"

"Let's get out of here before he thinks of something else to ask and comes back," urged Rennie.

"By all means. Come, Cerberus."

They rose and began walking toward the car park.

"Do you want to go to the reception?" asked Bethancourt.

"It's frightful, but I think I do," she answered slowly. "I came to celebrate Allyson's marriage, and I'd rather like to do it."

"Think you can manage to look cheerful and carefree?" he asked.

"Actually," she said, looking abashed and raising her chin as if in defiance of it, "all this seems to have had exactly the opposite effect on me than it ought to have had. Instead of feeling depressed, I feel positively lightheaded, even giddy."

"Reaction," said Bethancourt. "All right, we'll go. If it gets to be too much, let me know and I'll take you back to the inn."

"But what about you? How are you feeling?"

"Oh, I'd quite like to go," he answered. "It should be easy enough to find out who was at the church first this morning. Don't worry—I'm a great dissembler when I want to be."

The first thing Bethancourt saw when they got to the reception was Marla dancing with Rick Askew. He tried to catch her eye, but when she saw him, she merely leaned closer into Askew's body. Bethancourt

shrugged. As he had not run after her when she left the church, he had probably offended her further, and there was nothing to be done about it just now. Since Aubrey and Allyson were also dancing, he moved off to get a drink, feeling that he could use one, while Rennie went to chat with the maid of honor.

He had just secured his drink and was again surveying the dancefloor when a voice behind him said, "You and I are certainly lucky, aren't we?"

Bethancourt turned and found Askew grinning at him.

"Lucky?" said Bethancourt, who was feeling anything but.

Askew made a vague motion toward where Rennie was sitting. "We've hooked up with the two most beautiful women in the place. Two champagnes, please," he added to the bartender. "Did you see the one I was dancing with?" he continued. "A tall redhead, absolutely gorgeous? She's a model," he finished proudly.

Bethancourt was very glad to be able to say truthfully to himself that, in all the time he had been dating Marla, he had never made a remark like that.

"I know," he said, taking out his cigarette case. "I know her."

"Here, let me," said Askew, producing a gold lighter encrusted with diamonds. Beth-

ancourt offered him his case, but Askew waved a hand.

"Thanks, no," he said. "I prefer my own brand." From his pocket he pulled out an ornate gold cigarette case, the companion to the lighter, which Bethancourt felt was not in the best of taste. He wondered if it was really as awful as he thought it, or if he was reacting to the fact that Askew had apparently taken Marla away from him. He was annoyed with himself.

"You've dropped your matches," he said, stooping to retrieve them.

"Matches?" Askew seemed surprised. "Oh, that's right—I was having trouble with the lighter this morning, but it seems to be working now." He flicked the vulgar object into life again and gazed proudly at it.

"Hello, fellow ushers." Giles Porter reeled off the dancefloor with Clarissa Benton and beamed happily at them. His face was flushed, probably the result, Bethancourt thought, of too much champagne. Porter did not have a strong head for alcohol. "Splendid reception, isn't it?"

"Splendid," agreed Askew enthusiastically.

"Wonderful," said Bethancourt, with noticeably less enthusiasm.

"I love weddings," said Porter expansively, demonstrating this emotion by throwing his arms wide, inadvertently slapping Bethancourt in the chest with one and knocking an empty glass off the bar with the other. It fell to the floor, breaking into several pieces.

"Oh dear," said Porter, stooping.

"Here, Giles, let me," said Bethancourt, but he was not quick enough. Porter overbalanced and, putting a hand out to save himself, cut his finger on one of the glass shards.

"Oh, Giles," said Clarissa resignedly.

"Clumsy," said Porter, struggling up and gazing sorrowfully at his finger. "I'm always doing things like that."

This was true, but he sounded so sad about it that both Bethancourt and Askew leapt to reassure him.

"Nonsense," said Bethancourt. "Accidents happen all the time."

"I did exactly the same thing myself this morning," said Askew. "Broke the juice glass in the sink and stabbed myself picking up the pieces."

"Come on, Giles," said Clarissa. "I'll put a plaster on it for you."

"There you are, Phillip," said Fields, coming off the dance-floor with his arm around his

bride. They were flushed with exertion and laughing.

"Where on earth did you and Rennie get to?" asked Allyson.

"Or is that an indelicate question?" added Fields.

Everyone laughed.

"Phillip's a quick worker," said Askew.

"That's right," said Bethancourt, abandoning the carefully constructed story Rennie and he had worked out about Mr. Clerkenwell's illness. "Rennie and I felt we had to begin a torrid affair at once. It was one of those things that couldn't wait."

"Well, now that you're here," said Allyson, disengaging herself from Aubrey, "you're the only one who hasn't danced with the bride."

"And I've been worried about it," said Bethancourt promptly. "May I remedy the lapse now?"

He took her hand and led her back out onto the floor.

Dancing done with, Bethancourt circulated. He made an amusing story out of his disastrous morning, thereby encouraging others to tell him about their mornings. A great many people had driven down from London in groups, thereby affording them little opportunity for murder, but others had come down the night before and were staying in various inns in the area, all an easy drive from

the church. Bethancourt carefully marked down in his mind those who were not in couples and who had not joined in community breakfasts.

He was dancing with Rennie when he saw Gibbons enter.

"There's Jack," he said softly to her. "I'm afraid it's about to begin."

She sighed a little but made no other response. Gibbons waved at them and Bethancourt guided her off the floor to meet him.

"The chief inspector has set up an interview room," Gibbons said in a low voice. "I'm to bring people in one at a time without telling them anything—Neel wants to see their reactions to the news."

"That's discreet enough," said Bethancourt.

"How have things been here?" asked Gibbons. "Did you two have any trouble?"

"None at all," answered Bethancourt. "By the time we arrived, people had forgotten we hadn't shown up for the receiving line."

"Those who did remember seem to think we were having it off in the churchyard," said Rennie tartly.

Gibbons grinned at her. "All right," he said. "By the way, Phillip, are you going back to-night?"

"No," said Bethancourt. "I booked a room at the Mill Pond Inn in case I didn't feel like driving after the party."

"Good," said Gibbons. "That's where I'm staying, too. So I'll see you there if you've left by the time we're finished."

"You're sitting in on the interviews, then?"

"Yes. In Neel's more lucid moments, he's decided that having a detective along who knows all these people may be helpful."

"I don't like that man," said Rennie.

Gibbons shrugged. "He knows his job. I'd better get on. Aubrey's first up, and I'm not looking forward to it."

He disappeared in search of the groom. Bethancourt looked down at Rennie, whose high spirits seemed to have deflated like a balloon.

"Let's finish our dance," he said.

She smiled at him and nodded her assent.

Chief Inspector Neel did not interview everyone, so a large portion of the gathering remained ignorant for some time of what was going on. Nevertheless, a pall seemed to fall over the celebration almost at once. Bethancourt found an opportunity to speak to Marla, but she was very cool and insisted she had nothing to say to

him, implying that it was unlikely she ever would have. She, of course, was interviewed in order to establish his alibi, and he waited until she emerged, thinking she might feel different when she knew what had happened. She, however, merely glared at him, as if having to prove his innocence of murder had been the last straw, and he abandoned the attempt at reconciliation. Shortly after that, Rennie asked to be taken back to the inn, and he was happy to leave.

At the inn, he checked into his room, but after changing out of his suit, he repacked his overnight bag and took it back down to the car. He had, of course, originally planned to share the room with Marla, but he thought it unlikely that she would now welcome this arrangement, and he had no taste for being kept up all night arguing. If she showed up, he could always stay in Gibbons' room. Rennie had gone to her room to have a nice soak, so he decided to fill the time till supper by taking Cerberus for a long walk.

It was a very long walk indeed, although a lot of it was spent sitting and thinking on a fence while watching Cerberus investigate a large field. The sun was low in the sky when Bethancourt returned to the

inn, more than a little depressed, and learned that Gibbons was back. He went up to his friend's room and found him just emerging from the shower.

"I'm starving," Gibbons announced.

"I saw a decent-looking pub while I was walking Cerberus," said Bethancourt. "Maybe we should go there—the dining room downstairs is already full of wedding guests."

"Sounds good," agreed Gibbons. "I don't fancy any more questions. God, but Chief Inspector Neel can rub you the wrong way. His technique is to be as offensive as possible and hope the witnesses let something out when they lose their tempers. It was interesting, though," he added, "to see who managed to remain calm in the face of adversity."

"I don't expect Marla was one of those," said Bethancourt.

Gibbons grinned. "No," he said, pulling a shirt out of his bag. "She blew up almost immediately, and Neel blew up right back. It was exhausting. Poor Giles Porter just got more and more confused, and when he finally realized Neel was hinting he might have done it, he went speechless. Neel thought it was all a ploy, and when I tried to suggest that confusion was more or less Giles's natural state, he turned

on me and told me I wouldn't be much help if I insisted on shielding these people."

"Oh, really," said Bethancourt, disgusted. "I'm glad I wasn't there—I might have lost *my* temper."

"I nearly did," admitted Gibbons. "He kept implying, periodically, that I might have done it myself."

"He just does it to annoy, because he knows it teases," said Bethancourt.

"That's about the size of it," agreed Gibbons. "I'm ready—let's find this pub of yours."

"Can I leave Cerberus here?" asked Bethancourt.

"Sure," answered Gibbons. "What's happened to your room?"

"I'm waiting to see if Marla takes it away from me. If she does, can I bunk in here with you?"

"Of course," said Gibbons. "Haven't you made up with her yet?"

"I tried, but she wasn't having any," said Bethancourt, more lightly than he felt. "A cooling off period is indicated, I think."

"You know best. Let's go."

At the pub, they settled down with glasses of single malt scotch and ordered steak and kidney pie. Bethancourt took a drink of the whisky, lit a cigarette, and said, "All right. I'm

ready to hear the worst. Where do we stand?"

"First of all," said Gibbons with a grin, "I'm not supposed to be telling you anything at all. If Neel finds out I have, he's going to arrest me for interference in a police investigation."

"Oh Lord," moaned Bethancourt.

"I'd like to see him try," said Gibbons. "Anyway, the forensics team was much more sympathetic. Bob was struck in the head from behind, probably with one of those brass candlesticks, which, by the way, had been wiped clean. He was struck twice, and the pathologist says the second blow may or may not have resulted in unconsciousness—he might just have been stunned. Then he was strangled, also from behind, with a rope which we haven't found. A smooth one, though—there were no abrasions, just the impression in the bruises."

Bethancourt was frowning. "Why would anybody start to bash their victim's head in and then abruptly switch tactics in favor of strangulation?"

"Probably because of the blood," said Gibbons, shrugging. "Look at it this way—Bob's already been hit in the head twice, and he probably isn't even completely unconscious, much less dead. It must

have occurred to our killer that to kill him that way he would have to hit a great deal harder, which would necessarily result in a great deal of blood, some of which would very likely end up on the killer himself. So he spies a rope and decides to finish up with the neater method."

"That makes even more sense," said Bethancourt, "if it was unpremeditated. I mean, he loses his temper and whacks Bob in the head. Then he sees what he's done and has a choice: finish him off, or face the consequences."

Gibbons nodded. "Something like that," he said, "although he'll now have to face much worse consequences if I have anything to say about it. Anyway, Bob was definitely killed in the vestry sometime this morning. They say if we could find the rope there might be enough skin cells on it to prove it was the murder weapon. Unfortunately, it's probably burnt to a crisp by now."

"I don't know," said Bethancourt, tapping his cigarette thoughtfully on the edge of the ashtray. "It's not so easy to find a place to burn something like that, especially if you're staying away from home, which most of the suspects are. None of the inns will have fires going in June."

Gibbons shrugged. "It would be easy enough if you had a little petrol or lighter fluid and found yourself a nice, isolated country spot. And there are plenty of those around here. Besides, why else would he take it away? A piece of rope doesn't take fingerprints."

"No," agreed Bethancourt. "What about DNA testing on the cigarette end?"

"It was a Rothmans," said Gibbons, "and they found a packet of them on the body. It's not too likely the murderer smoked it. What I want to know is why he happened to have a piece of rope on him—I don't see how it could be a premeditated crime. Though, of course," he added with a scowl, "as soon as I said so, Neel said it was perfectly possible."

Bethancourt waved a hand. "Forget Neel," he said. "Tell me what you think happened."

Gibbons took a sip of his drink and then brought out his notebook and studied it for a moment before replying.

"The first person at the church was the vicar," he said. "He got there about eight thirty, two and a half hours before the ceremony, to let in the florists. The church was locked when he arrived, so presumably the murder had not yet taken place. The florists arrived, and Mr. Clerkenwell

went home to breakfast. He says he saw no one but the florists."

"I don't suppose you've talked to them yet?" asked Bethancourt.

"No, that's slated for tomorrow," said Gibbons. "Neel, of course, will never tell me what they say, but I have high hopes of his sergeant. Jim and I exchanged many a long-suffering look this afternoon."

"In other words, you bonded," said Bethancourt with a grin.

Gibbons smiled back. "More or less," he said. "Anyway, next we have Aubrey. He was supposed to meet Bob at the church at nine thirty, but he was twenty minutes late. Now, he had told Bob that he could change in the vestry, and Bob was dressed in a grey suit, so presumably he had time to change and put his bag back in the car before he met his murderer."

"You found his car then?" asked Bethancourt.

"Right in the car park," said Gibbons. "To get back to Aubrey: his sister Susan drove him over, and they parked in front of the church, so they didn't see the car in the car park. The florists had gone by the time they arrived. They went into the church and the vestry, looking for Bob, but went back outside to wait when

they didn't find him. Neither remembers whether that altar cloth was on the table in the vestry or not. Susan didn't stay long—she still had to dress—and she left Aubrey there alone. He waited out front for a bit, and then went for a walk in the churchyard. When he wandered back, he saw Giles coming out of the vestry. This was about forty to forty-five minutes before the ceremony."

"Well, at least one of us was early," said Bethancourt.

"Actually," said Gibbons, "Giles thought he was late. He thought you were all supposed to be there at nine thirty, and he started out in good time but got a puncture halfway there and had trouble changing the tire."

"His handkerchief was dirty," interrupted Bethancourt. "I mean, dirty with dirt. I saw it."

"Yes, but did he get it dirty changing a tire or wiping fingerprints away in the vestry?" asked Gibbons. "The place was clean except for some muddled prints on both doors."

"Oh dear," said Bethancourt. "I suppose Neel considers poor Giles a chief suspect?"

"After Aubrey and the vicar," said Gibbons grimly. "He can't believe it would take anyone forty-five minutes to change a

ture. I told him it was a miracle Giles managed it that quickly."

"But surely Giles didn't have time," protested Bethancourt. "I mean, how long was Aubrey walking in that bloody churchyard?"

"If we weren't talking about Giles here," said Gibbons, "I would say it was just barely possible. If he had gone into the vestry and found Bob there, well, it doesn't take long to hit someone over the head and strangle them. But even if Giles had a sudden, murderous fit, we both know he couldn't have strangled anybody. If he tried, he'd get the rope caught on the victim's nose or something."

"Absolutely," agreed Bethancourt.

"The only real point against him is that he saw Bob's car in the car park," said Gibbons. "He assumed it was Aubrey's, which Neel thinks is unreasonable and I don't."

"I think Neel is just being cantankerous," said Bethancourt. "He can't be that stupid."

"Possibly not," conceded Gibbons, "much as I would like to believe he is. Well, fifteen minutes or so after Giles arrived, Mr. Clerkenwell came back and went into the sacristy to dress, making it impossible for anyone to murder Bob in the vestry for the next ten or fifteen min-

utes. Except, of course, for Mr. Clerkenwell himself. About the same time, Susan and the Fieldses arrived, and there was more or less a continual stream of guests soon after that. No one admits to going into the vestry until just before the ceremony. It is possible that Bob arrived while everyone was milling about outside and, being so late, just went straight to the vestry to change and there encountered his murderer, who obligingly put his bag back in the car for him. It is also possible that he was even later and was murdered during the ceremony itself by any one of the guests."

"But," Bethancourt finished for him, "it is far more likely that he arrived on time and was murdered by the vicar before Aubrey arrived, by the florists, or by Aubrey himself. But you don't seriously believe Aubrey murdered his own best man."

"No," said Gibbons, "but Neel does. And he even thinks he's got a motive. Evidently Bob had been seeing Susan Fields of late, and it was getting serious. At least according to Susan."

"That's a motive?" asked Bethancourt incredulously. "I should have thought Aubrey would be delighted."

"Neel's theory," said Gibbons, "is that Bob informed Aubrey that it wasn't serious at all and Aubrey saw red. He thinks this more likely, believe it or not, because he got Susan to admit she was sleeping with Bob and Aubrey to admit he knew about it."

"The man's hung up on sex," remarked Bethancourt. "He and his wife probably sleep in separate rooms."

They were interrupted by the arrival of the steak and kidney pies, and for a time conversation was halted while both men ate hungrily.

"Do you know," said Bethancourt at last, spearing a stray kidney, "I think you're wrong in saying it couldn't have been premeditated."

Gibbons gave an inquiring grunt.

"Because it's likely that Bob arrived early," said Bethancourt. "If you're going to drive from York to Surrey to be best man at a wedding, you leave plenty of time for traffic jams and such. Assuming there weren't any, he might have arrived as much as an hour before he was due. So if you wanted to kill him, you might go out to the church quite early and wait. Practically everyone knew when Aubrey was meeting him, and if Bob hadn't shown up at least fifteen or

twenty minutes beforehand, off you go with no one the wiser. If he does show up, you kill him quietly and then trot off to dress and arrive with the rest of the guests. By the way, do you want to hear who had no alibi in the morning, or do you have all that already?"

"I've got a lot," said Gibbons, swallowing his final bite of pie, "but I'd like to hear what they told you. And I like your theory. It does away with the problem of why anybody would show up at the church so early and just happen to have a length of rope in his pocket. Let's get coffee, and then you can go over what everyone said. It would be very interesting if there were any discrepancies between what you heard and what we heard."

There were not any obvious ones, however, and the best they could do was compile a list of people who had had opportunity. Unfortunately, they had little idea of who among these might have known Bob well. In the end, they put anyone who had come from Yorkshire at the top of the list and anyone who was chiefly Allyson's friend at the bottom.

They sat over their coffee discussing various possibilities until time was called and then made their way back to the inn.

"I should give Cerberus a walk," said Bethancourt as

Gibbons let them into his room, and they were eagerly welcomed by the dog. "Do you want to meet me in the lounge for a nightcap?"

"I don't think so," said Gibbons. "I'm dead on my feet—all I really want is to sleep. I'll leave the door open in case you need to stay here. Just be quiet when you come in."

"All right," said Bethancourt, clipping on the dog's lead. "Thanks, Jack. I'll see you in the morning."

The walk accomplished, Bethancourt decided to have his nightcap anyway, before checking on the status of his room. The bar was shutting down, but he secured a brandy and took it into the deserted lounge.

"Hello," said Rennie Howland.

She was curled up at one end of the small sofa with a book open on her lap and a glass of brandy on the end table beside her. She had changed out of the pale gold bridesmaid's gown and was now clad in a loose silk tunic and a pair of leggings. She smiled at him—a warm, slow smile—and Bethancourt's flagging spirits revived instantly at the sight of her.

"Hello," he said and sat down beside her. As he did so, he realized they were not alone. Slumped in an armchair facing them was Giles Porter. He was

sound asleep but, thankfully, not snoring.

Rennie reached down to pet Cerberus. "He came in a few minutes ago," she said in answer to Bethancourt's questioning look. "He was awfully drunk but really rather sweet. He fell asleep in the middle of a sentence."

"Well," said Bethancourt, eyeing the slack form of his friend without enthusiasm, "I suppose it's up to me to get him to bed. However, he can wait until I've finished my drink."

"I'll help you when you're ready," she said.

He turned to her. "How are you holding up?" he asked.

"Better now it's quiet," she answered. "Dinner was awful, with everyone talking about it and pumping me for information. The last thing I wanted to think about was that vestry and—" She broke off and then shrugged. "At least the food was good. They've got quite a decent kitchen here."

"Have they? I missed it, I'm afraid. Jack and I decided to avoid being pumped for the gory details and went out to the pub just outside the village," he said, acceding to her obvious wish to leave the topic of the murder alone. "It had good food, too, and a very pleasant atmosphere."

She lit a cigarette. "I miss the food at home," she said.

"Home?" said Bethancourt. "Isn't this home?"

"Technically, I suppose," she said, smiling, "but I've been living in Hong Kong—I'm with the Foreign Office."

Bethancourt affected a frown. "You can't work for the Foreign Office," he said. "All Aubrey and Allyson's friends work at the Home Office. The next thing I know, you'll be trying to convince me you went to Cambridge."

Rennie giggled. "I did go to Cambridge," she said.

"Oh really," said Bethancourt disgustingly, but he was smiling at her.

"It just goes to show," she said, "you can't be too careful whom you associate with these days." She raised an eyebrow. "I take it you're an Oxford man?"

"Merton," affirmed Bethancourt.

"Well," she said doubtfully, "I suppose that's better than Balliol."

With mock indignation, Bethancourt went on to defend his college and cast slurs on the whole of Cambridge University. Rennie replied in kind until the discussion collapsed in laughter.

The brandy level in their glasses had dropped as they

talked. Bethancourt swallowed the last of his while Rennie sighed and stretched, catlike.

"I think it's time for bed," she said. "I feel better now."

Bethancourt looked at Porter, who had remained sound asleep. "Time to wake the baby," he said. He rose and prodded at Porter's shoulder. "Giles," he said. "Giles, wake up."

Porter snorted, stirred, and opened a bleary eye. "Phillip?" he mumbled.

"That's right," said Bethancourt. "Come on, old man. It's time for bed."

Porter seemed surprised to find that he was not in bed already. Once convinced of this fact, however, he did his best to rise, with a great deal of assistance from Bethancourt and Rennie, and much hindrance on the part of Cerberus, who clearly thought this was a new game. Once they had gotten him up, they arranged him between them and stumbled across the lounge—nearly tripping over Cerberus twice—up the narrow stairs and down the hall to his room, where Rennie ransacked his pockets for his key while Bethancourt supported him. She got the door open and the bed turned down, and Bethancourt tipped his

"Thanks," mumbled Porter, immediately curling up. Bethancourt seized one ankle and pulled off his shoe while Rennie dealt with the other foot. Then she flung the duvet over him.

"That should do," said Bethancourt, catching his breath and sinking into the armchair.

Rennie nodded. "I'm going to find my bed while I'm still on my feet," she said.

"Thanks for helping with him," said Bethancourt.

"You're welcome." She smiled at him and then bent suddenly and kissed his cheek. "Thanks for taking my mind off it all," she said.

He smiled back. "You did the same for me," he answered. "Goodnight."

"Goodnight."

She left, closing the door behind her. Bethancourt lit another cigarette and tried to steel himself to inquire about his own room. He was not having much success when abruptly he stabbed out the cigarette in the ashtray and said firmly, "Ignorance is bliss." He rose, Cerberus at his side, and went to sleep in Gibbons' room.

Neither Gibbons nor Marla was present at breakfast the next morning when Bethancourt came down, rather late. He joined a large table of

other wedding guests, including Rennie Howland, who were lingering over their meal and looking rather anxious, and uneasy. Checkout time was one o'clock, and most of them had jobs to go to on Monday morning, but they all felt it was somehow disloyal to go off leaving Aubrey and Allyson holding the bag and having to cope with Bob Peterson's parents, who were coming down from Yorkshire. On the other hand, they were well aware that there was nothing they could do beyond offering moral support, and they could hardly all crowd into the Whytecliffs' house to do that.

Into the midst of this discussion came Giles Porter, looking remarkably well for a man who had had to be poured into bed the night before. He had been visiting the newlyweds.

"That bloody policeman has forbidden them to leave for the honeymoon," he announced, settling at the table and accepting a cup of tea. "He clearly thinks Aubrey did it."

There were angry murmurs around the table.

"He can't have any proof," said Bethancourt. "Aubrey had the best opportunity, that's all. Once Neel's looked into Bob's relationship with other people, I'm sure suspicion will fasten itself elsewhere."

"But that could take weeks," protested Clarissa. "Are Aubrey and Allyson supposed to spend their honeymoon being grilled by the police in Surrey instead of having a nice time in the south of France?"

"Actually," said Porter, "I don't think they much mind not going. They're both pretty broken up about Bob's death—not exactly in the honeymoon mood."

"No," agreed Rennie. "I don't suppose having your best friend murdered would make you feel like going on holiday, whatever the circumstances."

Bethancourt looked up and saw Gibbons hovering in the dining room doorway. Once he had caught Bethancourt's eye, he beckoned and then moved out of sight. Bethancourt excused himself and joined his friend in the hall.

"I've been having breakfast with Neel's sergeant, Jim Bowen," said Gibbons. "Nice chap—I've promised not to let on to Neel that we even saw each other."

"What's that you've got?" asked Bethancourt, motioning to the papers in Gibbons' hand.

"Just a list of what they found on the body and in Bob's car," Gibbons answered. "And some pictures of the crime scene. Here, let's go up to my room—I don't want to get

grilled by all that crowd in there. I've already been pinned down by the Farthinghams and nearly made to tell all I know."

They climbed the stairs together and Gibbons let them into his room.

"They've interviewed the florists," he said, closing the door and tossing the papers on the bed. "Two of them apparently saw Bob arrive, just shortly after they started setting up."

"Did they see anyone else?"

"Unfortunately not," answered Gibbons. "But they weren't there for long—ten or fifteen minutes at most. They were in a hurry because they had two other weddings to do yesterday. Neither, however, did they see the vicar leave."

"So he might still have been there when Bob arrived," said Bethancourt, dropping onto the bed and lighting a cigarette. "But, Jack, did Mr. Clerkenwell even know Bob?"

"Not really," said Gibbons. "He met him once or twice when Bob was visiting the Whytecliffs with Aubrey. At least, as far as we know. Clerkenwell's only been here four years, and his last parish was in Yorkshire."

"Where in Yorkshire?" asked Bethancourt. "It's a big place."

"Near Sheffield," said Gibbons reluctantly.

"But that's nowhere near the Petersons' or the Fieldses'," said Bethancourt.

"Well, it's closer than, say, Cornwall," retorted Gibbons.

"All right," said Bethancourt. "It still doesn't get us much farther, though. Have the police turned up anything else?"

"No," said Gibbons. "They've been out since dawn looking for the rope, but they haven't found anything, not even a burnt patch in the turf, and they've pretty well covered the area near the church."

"Maybe the murderer did take it away with him," mused Bethancourt. "Just popped it into the boot of his car to get rid of later."

"Stranger things have happened," admitted Gibbons, "although it would be awfully stupid."

Both men thought silently for a moment.

"Are you staying on?" asked Bethancourt.

Gibbons looked surprised. "No," he said. "I've got to be back at the Yard tomorrow, and Neel hasn't officially requested my help. But I've arranged to stay in touch with Jim Bowen."

"It feels funny," said Bethancourt, "running off without any of the answers."

"Neel may be an ass," said Gibbons, "but he knows what he's doing. He's fixed on Aubrey

now because he was closest to Bob and had the best opportunity, but when he fails to find any evidence, he'll look farther afield. Quite frankly, if I were a stranger to all these people, I'd pick on Aubrey, too."

"We couldn't possibly be wrong about Aubrey, could we?" asked Bethancourt. "I mean, we don't really know him as well as we used to."

"No," said Gibbons firmly. "Maybe if the circumstances were different, I'd have doubts. But I really do not believe Aubrey could have murdered Bob on his wedding day and then looked so happy afterwards. He just doesn't have it in him."

"I suppose not," said Bethancourt. "Yes, you're right."

"Well," said Gibbons, standing. "I had better pack my things—I think there are a lot of people taking the twelve thirty up, and I can catch a ride to the station."

"That's all right," said Bethancourt absently. "I'll drive you back."

Gibbons, opening his bag, shot him an uneasy glance. "Uh," he said, "you and Marla aren't going to be having a little talk or anything on the way back, are you? Because, frankly, I'd just as soon not have to hear it."

"No," answered Bethancourt. "I don't even know where she

is, and I am not driving her back unless she wants to make up."

Gibbons paused in folding a jumper and looked at his friend. Bethancourt was idly turning over the crime scene photos and did not look up. "That's not like you, Phillip," Gibbons said at last. "Usually you're dashing around buying her presents when she's mad at you."

"Usually," said Bethancourt, "I've done something to annoy her, and her anger takes the form of not returning my phone calls. This time I am wholly blameless, and she decided to demonstrate her anger by running off with Rick Askew."

"Oh," said Gibbons. "Well, I'm sorry about it, Phillip."

"That's all right," said Bethancourt. "I'll probably make up with her after we get back to town. It's just a bit much at the moment, what with the murder and all."

"Of course," said Gibbons soothingly. He continued his packing. "I'll just finish this, and then I can check out and we'll go whenever you like."

"Mmm," said Bethancourt, who was still looking at the pictures.

Gibbons glanced at him. "Have you found something?" he asked.

"No," said Bethancourt, throwing down the photos and leaning back against the pillows. "I was just wishing all that hideous Victorian furniture could talk."

"Well, the cupboard did, in a manner of speaking," said Gibbons. "That scrape on the bottom of it was made by Bob's shoe—one of the reasons we know he died there." He picked up the photograph from the bed and gazed at it.

"It would be better," said Bethancourt, "if the murderer had carved his name on it and hung the murder weapon on the knob."

"Yes," began Gibbons and then he broke off, staring with increasing concentration at the picture. "Hung the murder weapon..." he murmured. "God, is it possible?"

Bethancourt sat up. "What is it? Did I say something clever?"

Gibbons handed him the photograph. "Look at the curtains," he said. "Look at the—"

"—the sashes!" exclaimed Bethancourt. "Silk cord sashes!"

"One of those would make indentations like a rope," said Gibbons.

"Hell, it is a rope," said Bethancourt.

"I think," said Gibbons, "I'd better ring Neel."

"I'll start checking us out," said Bethancourt, jumping up from the bed. "I've already taken my stuff down to the car. You get your things together, and we can meet Neel there."

"I don't know about that," said Gibbons, pausing with the phone in his hand. "It's not my patch, remember, and Neel may not appreciate the company. Besides, there won't be anything to look at—you can't see skin cells with the naked eye."

"We might be able to tell if one of the cords has been man-handled," replied Bethancourt. "You see what you can work out while I'm downstairs."

He was gone before Gibbons could protest further.

At the desk, the innkeeper informed him there was a note for him. Bethancourt took it eagerly, but his name on the envelope was not written in Marla's familiar scrawl. Curious, he opened it while the landlord dealt with his credit card and glanced at the signature. He was surprised to see Rennie's name.

"I'll be in London for the next week," she had written. "Would you like to have a drink sometime? Please do. Here's the number where I'll be staying."

Bethancourt smiled and shook his head. He was about to toss the paper away when he

remembered that he didn't know where Marla was or where she had spent the night. Thoughtfully, he folded the note in half and put it in his pocket.

"It'll be all right," said Gibbons when he came down. "Neel is sending Jim Bowen to pick up the cords and he won't mind us tagging along."

"How did Neel react to the idea?" asked Bethancourt.

"I don't really know," said Gibbons. "He didn't seem to think much of it, but on the other hand, he was sending Bowen down there with all possible speed. I think privately he thinks it may be the answer, but it's against his religion to say thank you."

Bethancourt snorted.

Sunday morning services were over by the time they reached the church, but there was a uniformed constable sitting in the vestry porch, so they decided they had better wait for Bowen. He was not long in arriving, a slight man with sandy hair and a disarming grin.

"I wondered if I'd see you here," he said as they got out of the car to meet him.

"Detective Sergeant Bowen, Phillip Bethancourt," said Gibbons.

They shook hands, and Bowen raised an eyebrow at

Gibbons but otherwise did not remark on this sudden intrusion of a civilian.

"I expect you want to see if any of those cords looks like they've been mucked about?" Bowen asked as he opened the boot of his car and removed a stack of evidence bags and three pairs of rubber gloves.

"That's right," agreed Gibbons easily. "We'd look for skin cells, too, if we thought we could see them."

Bowen chuckled and led the way to the vestry door, greeting the constable casually.

"D.C.I. Neel wants some stuff for forensics," he told him.

The constable fished in his pocket for the key and moved to open the door. "Vicar's just left," he said. "You'll have the place to yourself."

"Thanks, Ken. Oh, and, Ken? I don't think the chief inspector needs to know I wasn't alone."

The constable grinned. "He won't hear it from me," he said.

They passed into the vestry and went directly to the first window. Bethancourt and Gibbons watched while Bowen carefully unhooked the left-hand sash cord with gloved fingers and held it out. All three men peered anxiously at it.

"Nothing there," said Bowen after a moment. "At least, not for the naked eye."

Gibbons held open an evidence bag and Bowen dropped the cord in and labeled it. He unhooked the second cord and again held it up for inspection.

"That could be it," said Gibbons with suppressed excitement.

Towards the ends of the cord the smooth gold threads looked loose, as if they had been twisted out of shape and then restored, and one or two of them had broken.

"What's that?" asked Bowen. He turned the cord so that the others could see. At one end was a small brown stain and a slight smear.

"My God," breathed Bethancourt. "It looks like blood."

Each man thought of the bloodless corpse.

"So it does," said Bowen with satisfaction, turning it in the sunlight from the window. "Looks like our murderer forgot that little scrape he got playing rugby last weekend."

"Great heavens," said Gibbons reverently. "If it is blood, there's your case made."

"Almost," said Bowen, dropping their prize into a bag. "We still have to decide who to match it with, and just now the running's wide open."

"I thought Neel had decided on Aubrey Fields," said Bethancourt cautiously.

"He's favored at the moment," admitted Bowen, making out a label, "except for one thing: he doesn't smoke."

Both Bethancourt and Gibbons stared at him.

"I thought," said Gibbons, "we were assuming the cigarette end to be the victim's?"

"Oh, we are," Bowen assured him cheerfully. "It's the matches." When both men still looked blank, he raised an eyebrow. "Didn't you read that list I gave you?" he asked.

"Not really, no," said Gibbons guiltily. "I meant to, but then we had this idea about the sash cords . . ."

"Well, there were no matches on the body," said Bowen. "Therefore the murderer must have lit his cigarette for him. Now, in the ordinary way, we might think your friend Fields could have absently pocketed a box of matches after lighting the fire or the dinner candles or whatever, but that hardly seems likely when he was getting dressed so carefully for his wedding, does it?"

"Certainly not," agreed Bethancourt.

"I hate to say this," said Gibbons, "but couldn't Bob have gotten a match from the church?"

"He could have," said Bowen, moving to the second window, "or he could have gotten one

from the box of them in that cupboard there. But he didn't because all the church matches are the long kind, and the one we found was a normal one. Now Giles Porter doesn't smoke cigarettes, but he's fond of cigars and he uses matches."

Gibbons shook his head. "I really don't think Giles could successfully strangle anybody on the best day he ever had."

"He is a bit inept," agreed Bowen, "but everybody gets lucky at times. And if that is blood on that cord, well, Porter had a cut on his hand when we interviewed him. I noticed it."

"But he got that at the reception," said Bethancourt. "I was there, I saw him."

Bowen paused with the third cord in his hand and looked at him squarely. "Truly?"

"Truly," said Bethancourt. "Jack can tell you—I wouldn't lie, even to save a friend. Giles knocked a champagne glass off the bar and cut himself trying to pick up the pieces. Clarissa Benton and Rick Askew were there, too."

"Then that's not as good as I thought," said Bowen, and held up the third cord for examination. It seemed unmarked, and he bagged it without further discussion.

"Anyway," said Bethancourt, "there are loads of people with

no alibi for the early part of the morning."

"That's right," said Bowen. "We think the murderer arrived and found Peterson in the vestry. He lit his cigarette for him, and then they went outside to smoke it. During their conversation out there, Peterson said something, deliberate or not, that made our chappie decide to kill him. The murderer makes some excuse to go back into the vestry where he first disables and then strangles him." He unhooked the fourth sash. "This looks clean, too."

The other two men leaned forward to look and agreed. Gibbons opened another evidence bag.

"What about the vicar?" said Bethancourt suddenly. "He smokes a pipe, doesn't he?"

"Yes," admitted Bowen, "but there's virtually nothing to tie him to Peterson. And I doubt he'd have tossed the match on the floor—it's his vestry, you see."

"True," said Gibbons glumly.

"Of course," added Bowen kindly, "we haven't finished checking Mr. Clerkenwell out. And if Peterson had just revealed that he knew the vicar had been stealing from the church, Clerkenwell might have just thrown the match away in shock."

This seemed like such faint hope to Bethancourt and Gibbons that they said nothing.

"Right then," said Bowen, gathering up the evidence bags. "Let me get these down to the lab and see if we've got the murder weapon or not."

With a last look around, they filed out of the vestry, stripping off their gloves as they emerged into the sunshine.

"I'd appreciate it," said Gibbons as they reached the cars and Bowen stowed the evidence bags in his boot, "if you'd let me know how the tests turn out."

Bowen winked. "I will," he promised. "Are you heading back to town?"

"After lunch," said Bethancourt, who had not eaten much breakfast and was feeling hungry. "I don't suppose you'd care to join us?"

"Better not," answered Bowen. "I already took time out for breakfast and D.C.I. Neel will be waiting for me."

They took their leave of him, shaking hands and expressing their thanks, and then watched him drive off.

"Where do you want to eat?" asked Gibbons, settling himself in the Jaguar.

"At the pub?" suggested Bethancourt. "They did well by us last night, and Cerberus can come in with us instead of being stuck in the car."

Gibbons assented, and Bethancourt turned the car and started back toward the village.

Settled in a comfortable corner at the pub, Gibbons, who had had a long and hearty breakfast, ordered a salad, while Bethancourt ordered the plaiice, with extra chips, and had a scotch egg while he was waiting for it to arrive.

"What's that?" he asked, chewing industriously. "That list of Bob's personal effects?"

Gibbons nodded. "I thought I'd better look at it in case there were any other little gems we'd missed."

"Read it aloud," suggested Bethancourt.

"On the body," said Gibbons, obliging, "a wallet with forty-two pounds, his driver's license, two credit cards, a bank card, and several business cards. Sixty-eight pence in loose change. The packet of Rothmans, three-quarters full. A handkerchief. A key ring with the keys to his car and two others, presumably his house keys. A small comb. Phillip, if you drink all that bitter before you eat, you won't be fit to drive."

"I'm starving," said Bethancourt. "Was that all the list?"

"All that was on the body," said Gibbons. "Now we come to the car. More loose change, several maps—"

"Oh, look," interrupted Bethancourt. "Here's the food."

Gibbons broke off while they were served, and then continued while Bethancourt devoted his attention to his meal. Gibbons did not think his friend, so immersed in food, was really listening any more.

"Two pairs of leather gloves, a raincoat, a roll of paper towels, his registration, and a Yorkshire daily paper. The ash-tray was apparently quite full, with most of the cigarette ends being Rothmans, a few with lipstick stains, and four Dunhills, as well as numerous used matchsticks. In the boot was a cricket bat and three balls and a tennis racket and tennis balls. The spare tire and jack. An empty suit bag and hanger. A canvas suitcase containing..." Here he paused to get a bite or two of his salad. "... Containing three pairs of underwear; two sports shirts, one pair of jeans, one sweater, two handkerchiefs, a shaving and manicure kit, a pair of loafers, a pair of plimsoles, and a leather belt. That's it," he said, laying the list aside and turning back to his food.

Bethancourt swallowed a mouthful of chips. "That's funny," he said, reaching for his beer with a frown.

"What's funny?"

"That there wasn't a lighter or matches in the car. I had assumed Bob had left them in his other clothes."

"If he smoked on the way down, he probably used the car lighter," said Gibbons.

"Probably," agreed Bethancourt around a mouthful of fish, "but the matchsticks in the ashtray show that wasn't usual for him, so he must have realized he'd left his matches behind. He arrived here early—why didn't he stop and pick up a box? He drove right past a tobacconist's on the High Street."

Gibbons pondered this for a moment. "Perhaps we've been wrong," he said. "We've assumed the cigarette we found was smoked by Bob, but perhaps the murderer cadged one from him and Bob gave him the matches to light it with. And the murderer pocketed them without thinking."

"Possibly," said Bethancourt, finishing the last of his food. He grinned. "You realize, don't you, that rules out all of Neel's chief suspects? None of them smokes cigarettes."

"We don't know about the vicar," said Gibbons. "He might occasionally indulge."

Bethancourt waved this away, struck by a new idea. "I've got a better scenario," he said. "Bob arrives, changes

and stows his case in the car. He comes back, checks the church and the vestry again in case Aubrey had arrived while he was in the car park, and then settles on the vestry porch to wait and have a cigarette. I always thought it was odd that anyone should have lit a cigarette in the vestry at all, much less have been so messy about it."

"But, Phillip," said Gibbons, "Somebody *did*."

"Wait, wait," said Bethancourt. "The murderer arrives and finds Bob on the porch. They argue, or at least Bob says something imprudent, and the murderer realizes he can't let Bob and his temper (or his loose tongue) in among the wedding guests. But he doesn't want to kill him out in the open where they might be seen. So he either takes a cigarette from Bob or produces his own and uses Bob's matches to light it. Only he claims the wind is blowing the match out and suggests they go into the vestry for a moment. Even if he's a man who wouldn't normally smoke in a church, he's hardly going to bother about that now when he's about to commit murder. He lights the cigarette, pockets the matches, and waits until Bob has turned his back. He strikes him with the candlestick and then spies the sash

cord. He grabs it, dropping the cigarette to the floor and leaving the ash you found, and when he's finished, he picks it up and leaves." Bethancourt leaned back, well pleased with himself, and signaled for another half pint of bitter.

"If you're right," said Gibbons slowly, "there should be at least one more matchstick on or near the vestry porch."

"We can look after lunch," said Bethancourt.

Gibbons sighed. "Of course," he said, "there are any number of people who smoke and could have done it. At least," he added, brightening, "if that really is blood on the cord, we can always look around for someone besides Giles with a cut on his hand and figure it out from there. I didn't notice anyone with a cut, did you?"

"No," said Bethancourt. "And Giles—oh my God!"

He froze in the act of stubbing out his cigarette, staring at his friend.

"What is it?" asked Gibbons sharply.

"He had a box of matches, too," murmured Bethancourt to himself. "And his handkerchief was dirty—Giles's nose was smudged after he used it."

"Who?" demanded Gibbons.

"Rick Askew. He was flaunting an incredibly vulgar cigarette lighter when a box of

matches fell out of his pocket. He said he'd been having problems with the lighter, but it was working fine. And then when Giles cut his hand, Rick said he'd done the same thing that morning when a glass broke in the sink."

"Slow and steady now," warned Gibbons, as Bethancourt was twitching with agitation. "It's good, but we're not there yet." He frowned in concentration. "I haven't seen Rick since we came down from Oxford," he said. "I think he and Bob were friendly there, but I don't know if they kept up."

"Oh my God," groaned Bethancourt. "Marla might have spent the night with him. She'll never forgive me now."

"If she did, it's hardly your fault," pointed out Gibbons.

"It will be by the time she's wrapped her mind around it," said Bethancourt grimly. He had pulled some change from his pocket and was sorting through it. "I'm going to ring Aubrey—he'll know which hotel Rick stayed in. Maybe he hasn't left yet."

"Phillip," said Gibbons sternly, "you cannot alert Rick that he's a prime suspect. Neel and Bowen will have my head, and rightly so. We don't even know for sure that there's blood on that cord—he could be innocent."

"I don't care," retorted Bethancourt. "I'm getting Marla away from him if they're still here. She may have a nasty temper, but she doesn't deserve to be riding around with a murderer."

In the event, Bethancourt was persuaded not to accuse Askew of murder, largely because Marla was not with him. Aubrey confirmed that Askew was at the house, along with others who had arrived to offer their mingled congratulations and condolences, but Marla had come and gone in the company of Clarissa. Aubrey thought they were driving up to town together.

Rather relieved, Bethancourt and Gibbons joined Sergeant Bowen in a search for matchsticks near the vestry porch, detailing their suspicions of Rick Askew as they worked.

"That's very good," acknowledged Bowen. "I don't suppose you know what the motive might have been?"

"No," said Gibbons apologetically.

"You have to realize," put in Bethancourt, "that we've hardly seen either Rick or Bob since we came down from Oxford."

"I do," began Bowen, and then stopped. "Well, well," he said, "here's one of our prizes." Reaching into the grass, his

gloved fingers produced a burnt matchstick.

They found two more.

"Well," said Bowen, dropping the last one into a polythene bag, "I suppose it's evidence of a sort. At least, it bears out your theory as to how the murder happened. But I'd be happier with something a little more definite."

"There's the blood," offered Gibbons.

"If it is blood," said Bowen. "Nothing to do but wait for forensics. Meanwhile, we'll be looking into Rick Askew's background. I expect I'll be hearing from you in a day or two?"

Gibbons grinned. "I expect so," he said.

Marla did not return Bethancourt's calls that evening, and he was therefore quite surprised the next afternoon to answer the door and find her there holding a gaily wrapped box.

"Hello," he said. "What's this?"

"It's for you," she answered.

He took it, rather unenthusiastically. Marla did not usually give him presents, and he could not help but think this one was in the nature of an apology for having spent the night with another man. He had not wanted to know, but the conclusion seemed inescapable. He looked

down at her. She was very beautiful, and when not embroiled in a murder investigation, she was a lot of fun. But he suddenly wondered if he wanted to be with a woman who could even consider sleeping with Rick Askew.

"Open it," she said.

He did so, tearing off the paper and opening the box to reveal a rather handsome washed-silk jacket in an attractive shade of green.

"Thank you," he said. "I'm not sure what I've done to deserve it, however."

"You didn't sleep with that Chinese woman," she answered.

This was so unexpected that Bethancourt was speechless. He raised an eyebrow.

"I was furious when you didn't come back to the hotel room that night," she continued, not looking at him, and therefore not seeing the surprise and relief in his eyes. "Furious and, well, I began thinking that if I hadn't lost my temper... Anyway, I went over to Jack's room in the morning to see what he knew. I suppose you were both down at breakfast, but when I knocked, I heard Cerberus barking inside. That's when I realized you must have spent the night with him."

"I did," answered Bethancourt. "I just wasn't feeling up to an argument that night."

Marla shrugged. "So I went out this morning and bought you a present," she said, closing the subject. "Try it on."

Bethancourt slipped it on over his T-shirt and posed for her.

"Turn around," she said, eyeing him critically.

He revolved slowly.

"Yes," she nodded. "It looks very good."

"It feels good," he said. "Thank you." He put his arms about her and kissed her, feeling much relieved. He did, however, fervently wish she had come round a little earlier, before he had rung Rennie Howland and agreed to have drinks with her tomorrow evening. And it was not until late that night, while he lay awake in the dark, that he wondered why he should have assumed that she had not spent the night innocently in her own room.

The remains of an Indian take-away meal were spread over Gibbons' dining table. Bethancourt was slowly clearing it away while Cerberus watched his every move with an anticipatory eye. Bethancourt ignored his pet, however, being

engaged in trying to listen to Gibbons' telephone conversation while at the same time giving the impression of doing something useful. The conversation from Gibbons' end was not very illuminating, as Gibbons was mostly listening, only occasionally putting a question or a remark, but Bethancourt was giving it the larger part of his attention, which perhaps explains why, when Gibbons rang off forty-five minutes later, most of the food cartons remained on the table.

"Well?" said Bethancourt as soon as Gibbons set down the receiver. "What have they found?"

Gibbons leaned back. "There's a possible motive," he said. "Did you know that Rick was married?"

"No," answered Bethancourt, pouring scotch into two glasses and handing one to his friend. "Or, wait, perhaps I did. Now that you mention it, it sounds familiar. Didn't she die or have an accident or something?"

"She drowned," said Gibbons, "while they were on vacation in Mexico, eighteen months after they were married. She was a good bit older than Rick and had inherited a nice bit of money and part of a construction business from her first husband."

Bethancourt was shocked. "Are you trying to tell me Rick killed her?"

Gibbons shrugged. "The Mexican authorities wondered about it," he said, "but there was no proof. It's a lonely part of the coast, and it happened very early in the morning. Rick claimed they had gone for an early swim, but that he was rather hung over and had come out before his wife. He fell asleep on the beach waiting for her, and when he woke, she was gone. It may have happened like that."

"Even if it didn't," said Bethancourt, "what does it have to do with Bob?"

"Well, there was an unfortunate paragraph in the local paper about the incident, rather implying that there was some mystery about the death. Cheers." Gibbons paused and sipped his drink while Bethancourt watched him impatiently. "Bob comes into the story because he was also vacationing in Mexico and may have read that paper. At any rate, he did hear about Mrs. Askew's death because he canceled his own plans to go to Rick, but Rick had left by the time Bob got there. Neither knew the other was in Mexico, and we don't know if Bob ever told Rick about it. Bob went on to visit some friends in California, so it

might have been some time before they met again and by then Bob might not have wanted to bring up a painful subject."

"So why would he bring it up now, two hours before Aubrey's wedding?" asked Bethancourt. "It seems a rather thin story to me."

"I said it was a *possible* motive," Gibbons reminded him. "This was nearly five years ago, so presumably Bob wouldn't feel he was still treading on tender ground. Rick may have brought his own marriage up—people often do at a wedding. One thing seems certain: whatever Bob said, he said in all innocence. He was definitely not blackmailing Rick—the police have been through both their finances very carefully. Bob had no more money than he should have, nor can they trace any payments from Rick's end. And they haven't found much else to connect them. Bob has been in China a good deal for the last year—even Aubrey hadn't seen much of him."

"Did Aubrey say he and Rick were close?"

Gibbons shrugged. "They were still in touch."

"Hell," said Bethancourt, "you could say that about Rick and me. I ran into him a couple of months ago at the Oxford-Cambridge Club and had a

drink. It doesn't mean I know the least thing about him."

"That's as may be," said Gibbons, unmoved. "You know perfectly well, Phillip, that motive is often obscure. People do kill other people for totally inadequate reasons."

"I suppose so," muttered Bethancourt, unconvinced.

"It could also be," said Gibbons, "that Rick's innocent—there's a snag. Forensics analyzed the cigarette ash we found in the vestry. It came from a French black tobacco cigarette and not a Rothmans at all. Unfortunately, Rick apparently smokes Dunhills."

Bethancourt frowned. "What about the handkerchief you got from Giles?"

"They didn't get much there," said Gibbons. "It had dust and a streak of wood oil on it, which could certainly have come from the vestry, but it also could have come from nearly anywhere else. The blood tests aren't back yet—Jim's expecting them tomorrow—and they should clinch it, one way or the other. It's definitely human blood, and if it comes back as Rick's type, then they'll proceed with the DNA tests."

Bethancourt was silent for a moment. Then he swallowed the last of his whisky and said, "I keep thinking about Rick at Oxford. I never knew him very

well, just saw him around at parties or sporting events. But he seemed just like the rest of us. The more I think of it, the less I can remember anything at all extraordinary about him."

"I do remember thinking he was very full of himself," said Gibbons slowly, "but that's nothing up at Oxford. I thought the same thing about a chap on my staircase. Of course," he added with a laugh, "both he and Askew were much better looking than me and always got the girls I fancied." He rose and reached for the scotch bottle. "Like another?"

"No," said Bethancourt. "I'm having drinks with Rennie Howland in an hour. In fact, I should be going."

Gibbons gave him a look. "With Rennie? Are you taking Marla along?"

"Don't be ridiculous," said Bethancourt. "And don't look at me like that, either. I called her when I thought Marla had probably broken up with me for good, and I couldn't very well cancel. What would I have said?"

Gibbons merely grinned. "You live a dangerous life, Philip," he said.

"Nonsense," said Bethancourt. "I have drinks with people all the time—this doesn't have to be any different." He

rose, ready to leave, but paused as the phone rang. Gibbons reached over to answer it.

"Jack?" said a male voice. "It's Giles Porter. Do you think you could come round to the Oxford and Cambridge Club?"

Gibbons frowned while Bethancourt hovered curiously. "I suppose I could," said Gibbons. "I'm not a member, you know."

"That's all right," answered Giles. "You can come in as my guest. How long will it take you?"

"Fifteen or twenty minutes if I can find a taxi," said Gibbons. "But what's it all about, Giles?"

"Oh, didn't I say? I've got Brian Grantham here—you remember him, don't you?"

"I can't say that I do," answered Gibbons.

"Really?" Giles seemed surprised. "He was two years behind us at Oxford—at New College. Charles Grantham's younger brother. You must remember."

"Well, I don't," said Gibbons firmly. "Was there some reason you wanted us to meet?"

"Well, I think Brian may be able to help," confided Giles. "It's really a remarkable coincidence, but he was at another wedding in Surrey on Saturday—Doreen Carlton's. You remember Doreen and her brother Geoff."

"Of course," said Gibbons, who had no idea who they were. "Giles, are you trying to tell me Brian Grantham saw something?"

"That's right," affirmed Giles cheerfully. "Do you think you could hurry, Jack? Brian's got a date later."

"I'll be right there," said Gibbons. "Don't let him leave, Giles. I'll be there as quick as I can." He rang off and looked up at Bethancourt. "Did you bring the car?" he asked.

"Yes," answered Bethancourt. "But what—"

"I'll explain on the way," said Gibbons. "Right now we've got to get to the Oxford and Cambridge Club as quickly as possible. Giles may have found a witness."

"A witness? Giles?" said Bethancourt, considerably startled. "Are you sure?"

"Hurry up," answered Gibbons.

When they arrived in Pall Mall, they found a whole group of Granthams assembled, consisting of Charles, the eldest son; Brian, the next in line; and their younger sister, Diana. They were all gathered with Giles Porter in the lounge, quaffing various beverages and chatting animatedly. Giles performed

the introductions with a great many explanations of who had been at what college when and who had known whom. Gibbons finally took control by sitting down firmly next to Brian and asking him point-blank what he had seen.

"Not that much, really," answered Brian sheepishly. "You see, we were heading for Doreen Carlton's wedding in the next village, and we were running a bit late—"

"Oh, just admit it, Brian," said Diana. "You went to the wrong church."

"You were navigating," retorted her brother. "It's not my fault if you can't follow perfectly clear directions."

"I take it you ended up at our church?" asked Gibbons.

"Only for a moment," said Brian. "We'd been behind a red Ford Orion for the last mile or so when we spotted the church steeple. It turned into the car park there, and I was just about to follow when Diana pointed out that there didn't seem to be anybody around the church. So I pulled up in front of it and called out to a chap who was walking along in front. It was Bob Peterson, I guess, because he said it wasn't Doreen's wedding and he should know because he was the best man. So we drove off."

Giles was beaming. "You see?" he said. "The murderer must have been in that red Ford—nobody else was supposed to be at the church that early."

"Yes, how early was it?" asked Bethancourt. "Do you remember what time it was?"

"Vividly," said Brian with a grimace. "It was ten to nine. Doreen's wedding was at nine, and I was rather nervous when I found we'd got the wrong church that we'd miss it. But we pulled in dead on time."

"Two minutes after," corrected Diana.

"You weren't wearing a watch," said Brian.

"There's a clock in the car," she replied.

"Did you see the driver of the Ford at all?" asked Gibbons, interrupting the sibling rivalry.

"Not really," answered Brian.

"I did," said Diana. "Well, just the back of his head while we were following him—or her, I couldn't be sure. Anyhow, whoever it was wasn't very tall and definitely had dark hair—long for a man, short for a woman."

Gibbons continued his questions, but neither had much to add. Bethancourt, figuring he had heard the important bits, belatedly remembered his date and excused himself.

He was almost twenty minutes late, and he found Rennie sitting in a corner of the wine bar, sipping a burgundy and reading a newspaper. She shrugged off his apology, smiled her long, slow smile at him, and suggested he get himself a drink.

"I'm sorry," he said again as he settled himself. "Jack found a witness to interview at the last moment, and I wanted to go along."

"Really?" she asked, leaning forward with her elbows on the table. "A witness? What did they say?"

"I'm afraid I can't tell you," answered Bethancourt, who was thinking how unusual it was to be out with a woman who actually asked about the cases he was interested in. "You know how it is—sworn to secrecy and all that."

"Yes, I know," she said. "I run into that all the time whenever I meet up with MI6 people. I didn't think you were that paranoid, though."

Bethancourt was not to be drawn. He grinned. "I'm more paranoid than you give me credit for," he said. "Neurotic, too. Possibly working up to schizoid."

She chuckled and pulled a pack of Gitanes from her purse. She reached for the candle on

the table, but Bethancourt intervened with his lighter.

And then the world seemed to freeze for a moment. She rested her hand lightly on his to steady the flame and he suddenly saw the cut, just now healing, on her first finger and realized her cigarette was French black tobacco.

"What is it?" she asked, cocking her head at him, and he became aware that he was still holding his lighter out although she had finished with it. He clicked it shut with a snap.

"Nothing," he answered smoothly. "I was just noticing your ring—it's very pretty."

"Thank you," she said, glancing at her hand. "I bought it in China."

"Speaking of which," said Bethancourt, lighting a cigarette for himself, "when are you heading back to Hong Kong?" And even as he said it, he remembered that Bob had flown back from China last week.

"On Friday," she answered.

"It's funny that you never ran into Bob over there," he said. "I gather he'd been spending a lot of time in the Orient."

She shrugged. "I think Allyson did give him my number," she answered, "but we never hooked up—probably my fault. I don't spend that much time in the city when I'm not working.

I like to take little trips around the Chinese countryside."

"That must be interesting," said Bethancourt.

He kept her talking about her life in the Orient through the next glass of wine and then made an excuse and brought the evening to a close. She seemed faintly disappointed, but left readily enough, accepting his comment that he would be out of London for the next few days with only a rueful smile. Bethancourt, having put her into a taxi, practically ran back to his flat to ring Gibbons.

"So," said Marla, taking a bite of her salad as they were dining a few weeks later, "have you and Jack found out who murdered your friend yet?"

Bethancourt was startled. In the normal way of things, Marla did her level best to pretend there were no such things as murder investigations.

"We think so," he answered, "but the evidence isn't all in yet. In fact," he added bravely, "Jack may be by tonight—he was supposed to hear from the lab this afternoon."

Marla merely nodded and stabbed a tomato. "I thought that might be why you offered to cook," she said.

"It was not," said Bethancourt indignantly. "I offered to cook because you got up at three A.M. and worked all day, and I thought you would be tired."

"I am," she admitted, smiling at him. "And I appreciate your letting me stay here while they're painting my place."

"That's all right," he said, appeased. "I'm pleased to have you."

"Thank you." She stirred the salad with her fork, frowning a little. "Phillip? It—it isn't Rick Askew, is it? Because, well, I actually danced with him . . ."

"No," answered Bethancourt swiftly. "It isn't. I won't deny he was my first suspect, but I was no doubt influenced by jealousy."

"Jealousy?" Her jade eyes widened in surprise. "How could you possibly be jealous of someone like him?"

"Rick is a very goodlooking man," said Bethancourt sententially.

"But he's such an ass!"

Bethancourt chuckled. "Marla, my love, you are pandering to my ego and I appreciate it."

"He is an ass," she muttered, taking another bite of salad. She ate silently for a moment and then asked, "So who is it?"

"Who—oh. Rennie Howland."

"Rennie? I don't—"

"The Eurasian bridesmaid," supplied Bethancourt.

"Oh, the one I thought you—"

"That's right," interrupted Bethancourt hastily. "Here, let me fill up your glass."

"No more wine, please," she said. "I'll fall asleep if I do. Well, I'm glad it's her. I never liked her."

"We're not absolutely sure yet," warned Bethancourt. "Giles found a witness who saw her rental car pull into the church car park at the right time, and she fits the other clues, but—"

"Giles?" interrupted Marla. "Giles Porter? That Giles?"

Bethancourt grinned. "I know. Unbelievable, isn't it?"

Marla nodded. Wearily, she propped her elbow on the table and rested her cheek against her hand as Bethancourt continued.

"The blood on the sash cord is her type," he said, "but the DNA tests haven't come back. And of course, once we thought of it, it was rather suspicious that she claimed never to have met Bob in China." He frowned. "That's still the weak point, of course. Aubrey says Bob rang her several times, but she always put him off—odd in itself . . ." He trailed off as he realized Marla was contemplating the remains of her salad rather than listening.

"Marla? I've put some coffee on..."

"Oh." She leaned back and stretched. "Yes, coffee would be lovely."

The doorbell rang while Bethancourt was pouring out in the kitchen, and when he emerged he found Gibbons ensconced in an armchair beside Marla on the couch.

"Hello, Jack," he said. "Coffee or a drink?"

"Drink, please," said Gibbons, reaching out to pet Cerberus, whose tail was wagging in welcome.

Bethancourt handed Marla her coffee and retreated to the drinks cabinet in the corner to fetch Gibbons a scotch.

"That's unreasonable," he heard Gibbons say. "Don't you have a union or something? I mean, keeping you prancing about for twelve hours..."

"Jack," said Marla, "you work longer hours when you've got an investigation on."

"But most of my work is done sitting down," protested Gibbons.

"Here you are, Jack," said Bethancourt. He settled himself in a second armchair. "So what's the news? Marla won't mind," he added, hoping it was true. "She is feeling vindicated because she disliked Rennie on sight."

Marla yawned.

"They arrested her in Hong Kong today," announced Gibbons. "She'll be flown back here to stand trial as soon as the paperwork's through."

"Then she did know Bob in China?"

"Yes, a colleague of Bob's has identified her. It seems Miss Howland was leading a double life, passing herself off as a Chinese national. I imagine that started quite innocent-ly—"

"Imagine?" put in Marla. "Don't you know?"

"Not really," said Gibbons. "She's not saying a word, much less admitting to anything. Anyway, it's a lot easier to travel around China if you're not a tourist, and since her Chinese is fluent, she probably didn't see any reason to tell anyone she wasn't from Canton, where her mother's family lives. She just made up a Chinese name for herself. That seems likely, at any rate. But then she met a Mr. Liao, who was running a very profitable business by smuggling jade in from Burma and ivory in from Africa, having it carved into *objets d'art*, and selling it as antiques. She and Mr. Liao began an affair, and he persuaded her to help him with the smuggling end of things. How he thought she was managing it, I don't know, because apparently he

had no idea she was really Rennie Howland and worked for the Foreign Office."

"I take it she was well paid for her efforts?"

"It would seem so. At least, her bank account has more in it than she could possibly have saved from her salary. In any case, you can see how handy a double identity was: if anything had gone wrong, she could disappear and become honest British Rennie Howland again."

"So long as no one knew her in both identities."

"Exactly. And no one did until Bob came along. He and his colleague met Liao while looking into the antiques market. It was pure chance that they ran across him in a restaurant one night while he was dining with Rennie and joined them. There were one or two more social outings after that, according to Liao. And then Bob went to Hong Kong for a week and rang Rennie Howland. Who, of course, refused to see him."

"She must have been panicked."

Gibbons shrugged. "She probably had no idea how close he was to Aubrey and hoped just to avoid him whenever she was in England. Or at least for long enough that he wouldn't remember her so well and wouldn't be sure she was the

same woman. But the wedding put an end to that."

"Of course." Bethancourt glanced over at the sofa to see how Marla was taking this lengthy discussion, but she was curled up at one end, sound asleep. He smiled and said more softly, "I'm surprised Rennie agreed to be in the wedding at all. I mean, being in Hong Kong was surely the perfect excuse to skip it."

"According to Allyson, she had already promised to be a bridesmaid long before the problem with Bob arose—Aubrey and Allyson had a long engagement, you remember. And Allyson very carefully set the date for a time when Rennie would be coming home anyway. It would have been difficult to get out of, and I imagine her original intention was to persuade Bob to keep quiet. Possibly by seducing him."

Bethancourt raised an eyebrow. "Why do you imagine that?"

"Just an hypothesis," said Gibbons, waving a hand. "She seems not to have been very honest in her personal relations. This Liao chap evidently had the idea that they were heading for the altar, but we know that she was also sleeping with a banker friend in Hong Kong. Who was also infatuated with her. With that

sort of experience, she might well have thought that sex was the easiest way to shut Bob up."

"I see," mused Bethancourt. "Only, of course, Bob wouldn't have been interested; he was in love with Susan Fields. And, assuming her explanation to him didn't include her illegal activities, he would probably have thought the whole thing was a lark. He might even have made a joke of it, not realizing how serious it was to her."

Gibbons nodded. "Bob was rather like that," he agreed. "And Allyson admits that Rennie has quite a temper at times. If he didn't seem to be taking her seriously, frustration might have set her off. And after she'd attacked him, she either had to finish him off or face the music." He swallowed the last of his scotch.

"Like another?" offered Bethancourt. "As you can see," he motioned towards Marla, "you're not interrupting anything."

"All right then."

But Marla's eyes opened as Bethancourt rose, and she stretched languidly.

"Have you two finished your murder talk?" she said, sitting up.

"Yes," lied Bethancourt. "We're talking about cricket now."

"Oh." She yawned. "Well, I'm sorry, but I think I'd better go to bed. I'll just fall asleep again out here if I don't."

"All right," said Bethancourt. "I'll be in soon—Jack and I were just going to have one more drink."

She nodded sleepily and leaned over to kiss him. "Night, then. Night, Jack."

"Goodnight, Marla."

Bethancourt replenished the drinks while Gibbons waited until he heard the bedroom door close and then said, "I almost forgot—we heard from the lab today. They say they've got a good DNA sample from the blood on the sash cord. There should be no trouble with the comparison as soon as they get something to compare it to."

"That'll be it, then," said Bethancourt, handing him a scotch. He reseated himself and leaned over to absently scratch Cerberus's ears. The dog's tail beat on the carpet. "Do you know what I find disturbing, Jack?" he said.

"No, what?"

"The fact that I was attracted to her. I probably would have asked her out if Marla hadn't decided to make up."

"Well, she's a beautiful woman," said Gibbons practically. "It's not as if you knew her at all well."

"But I had a good time with her at the wedding," said Bethancourt. "I met her that night, too, after you'd gone up. She helped me get Giles upstairs and into bed. It's frightening to think one can be so easily taken in."

"Oh, don't be ridiculous," said Gibbons. "You can't tell a murderer by looking at them. That chap we caught in Northumberland last month—you didn't meet him, but he was perfectly charming. You're just upset because, if things had worked out a little differently, you might have ended up in bed with a murderer. Well, you didn't."

"It's not that exactly," said Bethancourt. "I admit that no *frisson* has run up my spine when I've met murderers before, but neither did I think I might become friends with them. This time I actually contemplated having an affair with one."

"Phillip, you still didn't know her," insisted Gibbons. "Supposing you had gone out with her? For all you know, you might have dumped her by the third date. God knows you're picky enough where women are concerned."

"I am not."

"No, you just demand that they be spectacular looking and

fantastically intelligent," retorted Gibbons.

"And have a decent sense of humor," put in Bethancourt, grinning. "Well, for all that, I'm less picky than you. I find lots of women to go out with—you hardly date anyone at all."

"That's because the beautiful, intelligent, funny ones all go after you," said Gibbons. "Besides, I don't have time for dating. Women generally don't like having plans canceled at the last minute because I've got to work. Or not being able to make plans at all because I don't know when I'll be free as long as an investigation's on."

"So you should date a different woman between each case," said Bethancourt mischievously. "You don't even have to break up with them—they'll do it for you when you become unavailable. And if one ever sticks around, you can marry her. Between cases, of course."

Gibbons threw a pillow at him.

"Truce!" said Bethancourt, laughing. "I'll let you manage your own affairs, I promise."

"Thank you very much," said Gibbons sarcastically.

They were silent for a moment, sipping at their drinks.

"Still," said Gibbons, "I know what you mean about this case. I've never known the victim before, and well, I didn't think

what a difference it would make. And somehow I don't feel as satisfied as I usually do when we've found our killer. I mean, Bob's still dead."

"I know," agreed Bethancourt soberly. "And I'm not looking forward to seeing all our friends in the witness box, either."

Gibbons only sighed.

When Rennie Howland came to trial, Bethancourt was called to testify to the finding of the body. It was a very uncomfort-

able experience, and he did his best not to look at her in the dock. That was almost unavoidable, however, and he was distressed to find she looked just as he remembered her. Knowing she had killed his friend made no difference at all. As soon as he was excused, he left on a trip to Turkey, where he did not speak the language and would therefore be unencumbered by news of the trial. It was not until he returned, some weeks after the trial's conclusion, that he learned she had been convicted.

UNSOLVED

by
Robert Kesling

Unsolved at present, that is, but can you work it out?

The answer will appear in the November issue.

The Annual Clarion Cotillion was the opportunity for the six richest women in the world to flaunt their finest gems. For Inspector Rector, however, it was the annual headache. As if to taunt jewel thieves, newspapers and television pictured the fabulous stones—the Ampersand amethyst, the Bengali brilliant, the Casimir carbuncle, the Doo-i-Loo diamond, the Easter emerald, and the Figgalo fire opal—together with their formally gowned owners, including Mrs. Tonwell.

Each lady had ensconced herself in a master suite of the Grand Hotel, one on each of floors three through eight. Secretly the inspector had installed hidden television cameras, each focused on the door of one of the suites. On the evening of the cotillion he sat in the basement of the hotel, nervously monitoring the six screens in front of him and hoping against hope that everything would go well.

At precisely seven forty, twenty minutes before the start of the gala dinner in the ballroom, a well-dressed figure approached each door, opened it with a hotel key, and slipped into the suite with a revolver aimed at the occupant. An inside job! Using his walkie-talkie, Inspector Rector alerted the detectives stationed on each of the six floors. The would-be robbers would, he trusted, be apprehended red-handed as each stepped back into the hallway.

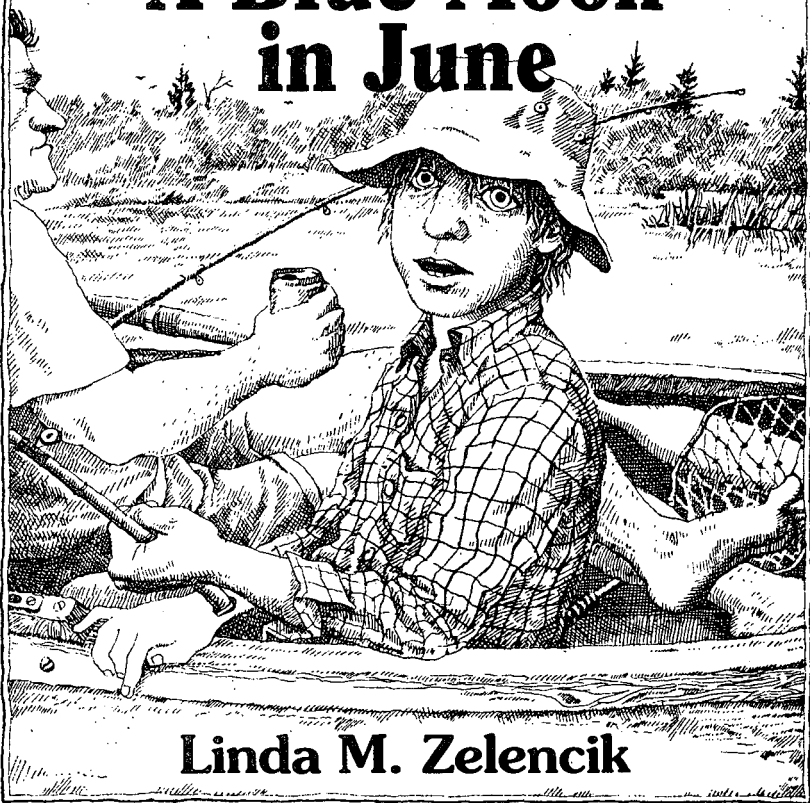
- (1) Ilena was in the suite immediately above the one robbed by Mr. Rattlee and just below the one entered by Ed.
- (2) Mrs. Xavier was just above the suite robbed by Mr. Quirkey and just below the one with the Casimir carbuncle.
- (3) Al, Bo, and Caz were after the Ampersand amethyst and the gems of Julia and Mrs. Wharton.
- (4) Kathy's suite was not the target of Dan or Mr. Maggoty.
- (5) The Easter emerald was on the floor immediately below Mrs. Spooner and just above the floor where Mr. O'Deeus was ar-

rested. Greta was on one of these floors, and Fred and Mr. Nawgood were nabbed on the other two.

- (6) Bo, Kathy, Mr. Piratto, Mrs. Upstern, and the Doo-i-Loo diamond were on different floors, but none of them was on the seventh.
- (7) Ed, Mr. Nawgood, and the fifth floor robber held up Kathy, Mrs. Van Lux, and the owner of the Ampersand amethyst.
- (8) Al, Helga, and the fire opal were on floors three, four, and eight.
- (9) Mr. Nawgood attempted his robbery on the floor just above Mrs. Wharton and just below Laura. Al was on none of these floors.
- (10) The first three arrests were made on the sixth floor, at Kathy's suite, and at that of Mrs. Xavier. Then Caz was taken into custody red-handed. Next, the robber with the Bengali brilliant was nabbed. The last robber to be arrested was the inside man who had supplied the plans and keys and, naturally, planned to steal the most valuable gem himself.

Who planned the heist? What jewel was he after for himself?

A Blue Moon in June



Linda M. Zelencik

Bigmouthed bass. Big mouths gaping for grub. I use fake frogs and the lures that look like worms in Day-Glo hula skirts. Bigmouthed bass are suckers for them every time. Bigmouthed women are suckers, too.

The lake. I like the lake. It relaxes me even when I'm not fishing. Sometimes I sit on the pier and look down into the water and wonder what it would be like to walk along the bottom. Or lie down and sleep with the fishes. Like the hoods say when they off some

guy—he sleeps with the fishes now. With the bucket-mouthed bass and their big, gaping mouths. Poking at the flashy, dangling things on her fingers and wrists. But she won't stir. She sleeps with the fishes.

The lake. I don't swim. I'm a dead weight in the water. But that night I went out to the lake and rowed to the middle. I waited. It was still. I could feel the quiet. And I did it. Keersplash.

Sarge. I never told him. But he knows. There ain't nothing Sarge don't know. "The blue moon in June," Sarge says, "is the best time for catching bass." Sarge knows everything. Like when I stabbed those piggies. They were ugly, little suckers with big stomachs. I don't know why I stabbed them. I guess I just wanted them to squeal and make their little piggy noises. When Sarge found out, he grabbed me by the neck and threw me to the ground. "I'll put you away," he yelled. "These pigs are property. We need these pigs to survive. That's what we're trying to do here, Leroy. Survive."

Leroy. Nobody ever calls me Leroy. Except Barb, of course. Everybody calls me Retardo. Dim. Goofy boy. Only Barb calls me Leroy. Sarge and Barb.

Barb says I'm a broken thing. A big beautiful butterfly with broken wings, she says. One time, Mrs. Botke made me kneel down in front of the class. And she said, "Pray for brains, boy. Pray for brains because God didn't see fit to give you any." Dear God, I prayed. Please give me brains. Please. Everybody laughed. I didn't get brains. Mrs. Botke banged me on the head with her pointer. She said I wasn't praying hard enough. So I prayed and prayed. I was still praying even after everybody went home. Barb came and got me. She said it was okay that I didn't get brains. She said Mrs. Botke didn't have any brains either.

Sarge says that bigmouthed bass are smarter than anybody or anything. They know when to push through the shallow windblown marshes or the upper parts of the coves and where to search out the crayfish burrowed in the slop. Sarge catches them when they're really boiling and wallowing. He snares them with his stinger hooks and spinning chuggaroos.

Sarge won't go fishing with me any more. All because of what happened with the pike. It wasn't my fault I got mad. When I landed the four-pounder, I hung it off the side of the boat just like Sarge said to. Except when I went to pull that sucker out of the water, a pike had its jaws wrapped around the bigmouthed bass. So's I flipped the bass into the boat. And the pike kept hanging on.

So's I got Sarge's softball bat. Bop! I banged it real good so's it wouldn't bite off our toes when it let go. Sarge says a pike can bite through a shoe. Teeth sharper than razors, he says. Ask Charlie Miller, he says. Ask him where his little finger is. Sarge says you can bet your dear sweet mama it's inside that pike. Charlie Miller didn't even know his finger was missing until it got cut clean off. The pike took it that fast. Anyways, I was mad because that pike could have swum away with my bass and I'd never have known it. I was lucky to pull out the bass when I did. I beat the pike with Sarge's bat, and I kept on hitting it because I didn't want it biting me or Sarge. Finally the pike let go of the bass. It was flipping around every which way. I kept on hitting it, and it kept right on thrashing and snapping. Then Sarge grabbed his bat, hit the pike between the eyes, and threw the pike and his bat overboard. And he was cursing. He said, "You just pop the pike on the head one time, Leroy. Just enough to knock it out. You don't beat it to a bloody pulp. Look at the mess we got here. You ruined everything. All the peace and quiet I get when I fish. Gone. Hell, now I'm sitting here with blood splattered on my boots. I don't even feel like drinking a beer here any more. That was my good bat, Leroy. Hell, I nailed tenpenny spikes in it to make it a super heavy hitter. That's what Klu used to do, Leroy. That's what made Ted Kluszewski the best slugger of all time. Big Klu was the best! He . . . damn you, Leroy. That was my best bat!"

I tried to tell Sarge I was sorry. But he'd have none of it. "Shut up," he said. "I don't want to hear it. I'm sick of hearing it!"

I wadded up some newspaper, and I tried to wipe up the blood. That made Sarge curse even more because I ruined his sports page. I started screaming. I screamed the whole way home.

Barb was waiting for us. Before she even opened her mouth, Sarge started in on her. "Shut your trap!" he yelled. "What's wrong?" she kept asking him. Sarge wouldn't tell her. He kept on cursing about his Klu bat and about how I didn't know from nothing. I tried to tell Barb what happened with the bass and the pike, but I couldn't stop screaming.

After that, Sarge went fishing by himself. He'd row out to the middle of the lake and sit there all day. Always thinking. He knew when I was watching him. "Stop your eyeballing!" he'd holler. Barb told him that I wasn't staring at him. "That's just how his eyes are," she said. "Big. Blue. Full of wonderment." "Bull," Sarge told her. "He's always watching us. Gives me the creeps." He told me

to stay out of earshot and eyesight. He'd sit there in his big brown Nageehide chair and watch *Andy Griffith* and *Get Smart*. "Hey, how about it, Leroy!" he'd yell. "Get smart!"

Sarge got hopping mad on Barb's birthday. He gave her a black and white striped umbrella. "Happy birthday, baby," he sang. "Some present," Barb mumbled. Sarge asked her what was her problem and told her to quit her squawking. He said the umbrella was a great gift because it didn't cost him one red cent. "I got it free when I bought my aftershave," he laughed. Barb said, "How come you want to smell pretty all of a sudden?" Sarge was quiet. Barb yelled, "Something isn't free if you have to pay to get it!" Sarge shook his head. "Well now, ain't that the truth! Ain't nothing free in this world, that's for sure. Look at all I got stuck with when I married you. I've had it up to here with you and Leroy!" he shouted. "Besides, I'm the one who needs an umbrella. A man has to protect himself against all the bull flying around here." Sarge stormed out the door with that big black and white umbrella trailing behind him like a giant skunk's tail. Well, I may not have brains like Mrs. Botke said, but I knew where he was headed. The Ball o' Fire and Rosie Maggio. I hated Rosie Maggio and her big, gaping mouth. Rosie Maggio laughed the longest and the loudest when Mrs. Botke made me pray for brains.

Rosie Maggio and Sarge were at the Ball o' Fire the day after Sarge threw his Klu bat in the lake. I know because I saw them myself. I followed Sarge because I wanted to tell him I was sorry about the pike and the bass and everything. I was waiting by the parking lot when they stumbled out of the Ball o' Fire. Sarge knew I was there because he stopped for a second and looked my way. But he couldn't see me because I was crouched down behind a garbage can. Oh, I knew that he knew that I was watching him because Sarge knows everything. Sarge is the smartest man in the whole world. Sarge is smarter than the big-bucket-mouthed bass. He hooks them when you can't even see into the water for all the lily pads and tree stumps and Sarge's beer cans. I'm lucky if I can catch one lousy little bluegill.

Anyways, Rosie Maggio screamed at Sarge to get the lead out of his pants. She kicked off her high heels and leaped on his back like a bullfrog jumping onto a lily pad. Sarge fell down on his knees. He was wobbling and weaving back and forth. Rosie Maggio wouldn't let go. She was squealing like a piggy. She banged him

on the side of his head with her purse and told him to get along little doggie. When they got to the car, Sarge looked over his shoulder at the garbage can where I was hiding, and he didn't say a thing.

I knew they were headed for the Windmill Motel. I saw a matchbook from the Windmill Motel fall under Sarge's Nageehide chair. It slipped out of his pocket when he was digging up change for the newsboy. He never knew he dropped his matches because he was breathing fire about the kid disturbing his dinner. "Remind me to quit that damn paper," he told Barb. She said we wasn't going to cancel anything because she needed the newspaper for wrapping up his smelly fish heads.

So whenever Sarge wasn't out on the lake thinking, he was home watching *Andy Griffith* or he was out whooping it up with Rosie Maggio. I knew what I had to do, and I did it on Barb's birthday.

As soon as Sarge left, I called the Ball o' Fire and asked for Rosie Maggio. I put my hand over my mouth. "Go to the lake." "Right now?" she whispered. "Yeah," I growled like Sarge does. "Go to the lake." She hung up, and I ran as fast as I could to the lake. I climbed up the weeping willow tree by the pier, and I waited in the branches.

She came right away.

"Come out, come out, wherever you are!" she giggled.

I held my breath to keep from screaming out.

"Come out, Dim. Game's over. I know it's you. Sarge says you're always watching him. You give him the creeps!" Then she laughed her ugly, loud laugh like she did when I had to pray for brains. I jumped down from the tree. She was laughing when I smacked her. She wouldn't stop laughing. She died laughing.

I dragged her under the weeping willow. I hid there until it was dark. I put her in Sarge's boat and rowed out to the middle of the lake where Sarge always did his thinking. But I didn't have to think about a thing. I threw her over the side of Sarge's boat. She made a big splash, but nobody was around to hear. Except the bigmouthed bass. Sarge says the bass know everything that's going on. "Don't make a sound, Leroy," he always says. "You'll scare them away." But I know that they're hiding there. Nosing around.

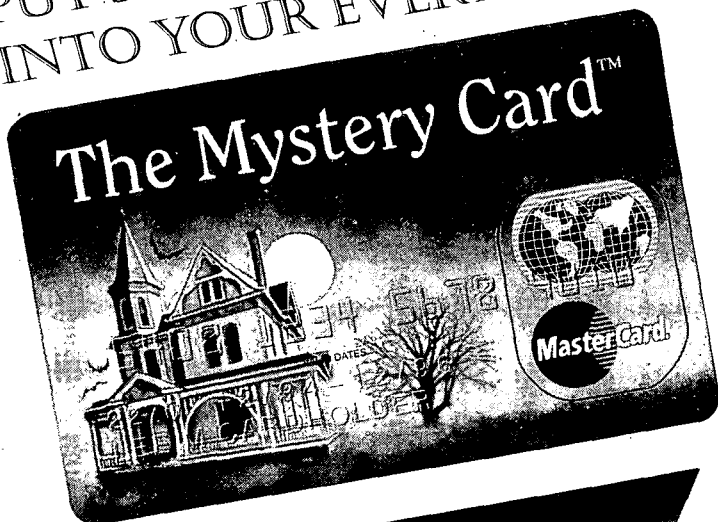
After Barb's birthday, Detective Trianna came nosing around and asked Sarge if he'd seen Rose Maggio lately. "Why ask me?" Sarge protested. Detective Trianna said only because Charlie

Miller saw Rose get a phone call at the Ball o' Fire and that she went running out without drinking her Singapore Sling. "Knowing Rosie, it ain't like her to leave a Singapore Sling unless it's Sarge calling," Charlie Miller explained. "We were all home celebrating Barb's birthday, ain't that right, Leroy?" Sarge smiled. "Besides, I can't go any damn place without Leroy knowing about it, ain't that right, Leroy?" I screamed that it wasn't true that I was always watching Sarge, and that I didn't know where he went that night. Detective Trianna said, "Calm down, boy." And then he turned to Sarge and asked him, "Where's that Klu bat with those tenpenny spikes nailed into it?" Sarge shouted, "What the hell are you driving at?" "Nothing. Nothing." Detective Trianna grinned. "Don't you think it's odd that your favorite bat just kind of disappeared?" Sarge was wild-eyed. "I threw it in the lake, ain't that right, Leroy?" I couldn't answer because I couldn't stop screaming. "Ask Leroy," Sarge shouted. "I'm asking you!" Detective Trianna belowed back. "It's a long, long story." Sarge shrugged. "Get in the car, so we can talk where it's quiet." Sarge shook his head again. "Hell, you don't even have a body." "Hold on now!" Detective Trianna pulled out his notebook. "Who said anything about a body?" Now Sarge was screaming with me. "Rosie don't mean nothing to me!" He was looking right at Barb, but she didn't see him. She was smiling at me.

The lake. I like the lake. Sometimes I'll go out on the lake at night and sit there thinking. Just like Sarge. I like looking up at the moon and seeing it smile back. The blue moon in June is gone. Sometimes I'll throw out my cast for the heck of it. I don't bother putting jerk worms on the hook because it don't matter if I catch anything.

The other night, I snagged a bluegill by accident. I pulled it out of the lake and let it wiggle around and gasp for air. Then I yanked the hook out of its mouth and threw it back in the water. Tell the bigmouthed bass to stop nosing around. Tell the bigmouthed bass to stop nosing around that bigmouthed woman.

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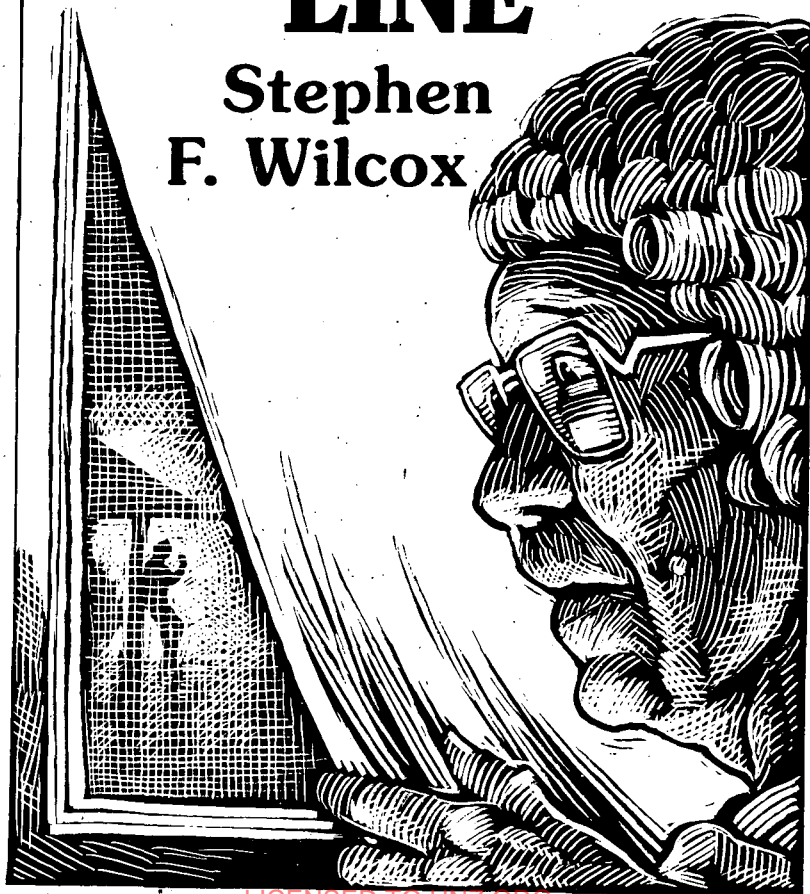
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FICTION

ONE TOKE OVER THE LINE

Stephen
F. Wilcox



If you want to send yourself to an early grave, that's up to you, but I'm not interested in becoming a second-hand victim. I'm sorry, but—"

"It's no problem, Mom," Sid Malek said, tucking away the pack of Marlboros. "I'll just step outside."

"Well—you can smoke out on the lanai if you want," Greta Malek offered, in a tone that indicated she'd rather he didn't.

"That's okay. It's a nice night."

"They're mostly all nice down here, Sidney. That's what I've been telling you. No more western New York winters for me, thank you very much."

Sid put his smile on automatic pilot and got out the door before she could quote the Weather Channel at him again. He didn't need reminders of how lousy it was up in Rochester; he'd only just flown south that morning, leaving behind pewter skies and frozen sidewalks and a record-setting Lake Ontario windchill. He crossed the small lanai—a screened breezeway, as far as Sid could tell—and stepped through to the carport, taking the cigarettes from his shirt pocket and fixing himself a smoke as he went. He sidled between his mother's Crown Victoria and the set of golf clubs

he'd brought down with him, thinking what a kick it would be to get in a few rounds this early in the year. Reaching the carport's open end, he leaned against one of its wrought-iron support columns and took a deep drag.

Twilight Retirement Community was as quiet as the proverbial tomb that early March evening, the only signs of habitation coming from the unnatural flicker of television sets; glimpsed at oblique angles through the slatted aluminum awnings and jalousied windows of several of the double-wide mobile homes within view, including his mother's. From his vantage point, Sid could just hear the program she was watching, some kind of tabloid news show, the volume turned up to compensate for her diminished hearing. Everyone's windows were closed—it was a cool evening by Florida standards, with a wispy fog beginning to roll inland from the Gulf—but Sid could imagine the blare from all those TV sets on a warmer night; scores of retirees with their sets turned up and their jalousies cranked open for crossventilation.

"Christ." He shook off a mental shudder and toked again on the cigarette.

Still, she seemed happy here since moving down perma-

nently after New Year's. No more icy roads to worry about in that big Ford of hers. And, hey—who knows? Maybe by the time he was seventy, Sid would be ready to settle for sunshine and shuffleboard and CNN. Then he flashed again on the bitter winters up north, not to mention his failed marriage and his boredom with the job since the captain had put him on permanent desk assignment.

Maybe he was ready now. For a change, at least.

Lillian Dwyer put down her magnifying glass on the table next to the recliner and refolded the newspaper on her lap. With her thumb and forefinger, she gently massaged the bridge of her nose.

I don't know why I do this to myself, she thought, contemplating the article she'd just finished reading for the second time. A widow woman living alone should know better than to scare herself with such horrible things.

On the other hand, wasn't it wiser to stay informed, what with a homicidal maniac out stalking seniors?

She glanced down at the paper again. Then, with a sigh, she struggled up from the chair and, gradually straightening, went over to the front door to

recheck the deadbolt. As far as Lillian was concerned, the world was going to Hades in a handbasket...

The St. Petersburg daily, in deference to the tourist industry, had shorted the story as much as it could, running each new murder below the fold on the front page and burying all follow-ups on the police investigation on the inside pages of the local news section. It was the Tampa papers and broadcast media that had glommed onto the Machete Murderer sobriquet and were playing it for all it was worth. St. Pete's cross-bay sibling had long resented the staid smugness of its western neighbor, whose residents had for so many years stuck up their noses in self-righteous disdain at Tampa's own embarrassingly high crime rate. Now that a serial killer was loose in northern Pinellas County, it was payback time.

In truth, the five homicides had all been committed with what the medical examiner had described as "a long-bladed knife or cutting instrument," the victims' wounds indicating that a blade of somewhere between seven and ten inches had been diligently, fanatically employed. But early on, a headline-writing copy editor over in Tampa had decided that ten inches was at least ap-

proaching machete proportions, and anyway, the imagery and alliteration of "Machete Murders" was too good to pass up. So the name had stuck, much to the dismay of the St. Pete Chamber of Commerce, the Pinellas County Tourism Council, the local chapter of the hotel and motel trade association, and all the restaurant owners, souvenir shop proprietors, condo developers, and mobile home park managers on the peninsula, many of whom had anted up cash toward a fifty thousand dollar reward for information leading to the arrest and conviction of the madman in their midst.

But Lillian wasn't thinking about rewards, or even justice; the only thing on her mind was survival.

She tried the deadbolt and was turning back toward her chair when something amiss caught her attention through the glass in the door's upper pane. She pushed open the cafe curtains for a better look.

Yes. Definitely. Across the way, three or four units down, just past where narrow Palm Drive curved around and became Cactus Court. Movement; a half shape on the edge of an unlighted carport, pinpointed for her tired eyes by a tiny orange glow.

Someone standing in the shadows, smoking a cigarette. Standing beside—which unit would that be? Grace Minetta's old place? Grace had moved back with her daughter after her Charlie had died last fall, and as far as Lillian could recall, the property was still up for sale. The place next to it looked dark, too; either one could be Grace's old trailer. Everything looked so different at night, and what with the fog starting to drift into the park—

The orange glow came again, tracing the man's nervous, contained movements—she was certain it was a man's shape, even with her eyes and the fog—and suddenly Lillian realized how clearly he must be able to see her, peering out through the glass with the living room lights blazing behind her.

She pulled the curtain back into place and, as quickly as her arthritic hip would allow, hobbled a circle around the room, turning off all but a small reading lamp on the table beside her recliner. Then she settled at one end of the sofa snuggled into the curved bay window and cautiously drew back the edge of the drape.

Heart fluttering, she squinted into the night for the longest time, until she was sure the man was gone.

*

"You're going out again, Sidney? You just came in."

"Half an hour ago."

"Another nicotine fit, hmm? Those things will be the death of you."

Sid's only response was a concessionary shrug. Then he made the trek through the lanai and out to the carport, preoccupied with his own thoughts and the novelty of a warm March evening.

Seductive. That was the word for it, he decided. One day down here—a matter of hours, really—and already he was caught up in the possibilities. How did that song go? *Southern nights . . . da-da, da, da, da-da . . .*

He was forty-three, with twenty-one of those years spent as a cop with the Rochester PD, work he'd always enjoyed until a promotion had required he give up the streets. He'd planned to do his thirty before hanging it up, but now the thought of another nine Rochester Januaries . . .

He glanced around at the carport's metal roof, the mobile home's vinyl siding. His mother had paid mid-thirties for the place, plus she had monthly rental and maintenance fees, but still. For as little as seventy-five thousand, she'd told him, a person could buy a nice

two bedroom, two bath ranch, all masonry construction with a tiled roof and an attached garage and a decent yard.

"Of course, the mobile home park here was all I needed," she'd said. "But for someone younger, who doesn't mind taking on some light maintenance, there must be two dozen new housing tracts to choose from just within ten miles of here."

He knew she'd like to have him nearby, particularly as she got older and less able to do for herself. And he did worry about her, living alone, having no family in the area.

On the down side, if he retired from the force now, he'd have nothing but the monthly pension going for him; half the amount he was living on now. That was it, the sum total of his worth. His ex-wife had gotten the house in the settlement, and while there were no children or alimony payments to worry about, he had no savings, no investments; just a smallish apartment in a singles complex, some decent stereo equipment, and a leased BMW.

Still, it shouldn't be very tough finding work down here if he really wanted to make a move. He knew from an item in the PBA newsletter that Florida was número uno in national crime stats—another reason he worried about his mother.

Plenty of places had to be hiring guys with his credentials; pick up something part-time with a private security outfit maybe and, with the pension checks, he'd have an income he could get by on and enough spare time for the beaches and the links.

But he'd still need a place to live. Mom was great—aside from the smoking, she never bugged him about anything—but moving in with her, even for a few months, was an experience neither of them needed. And singles apartment complexes at his age were like a daily reminder of the failure of personal relationships; his and everybody else's.

No. He'd want his own place—a patio garden to putter around in and walls he could drive a nail into anywhere he pleased. A garage with room for a little workshop in back. Maybe a pool...

Yeah, right.

Sid blew out a plume of smoke and stepped from the carport onto the slim strip of lawn, leaning his shoulder against a tall palm.

Who was he kidding? With a spotty credit rating—and without enough cash on hand for closing costs, let alone a decent down payment—he was gonna buy a house?

Keep dreaming, man.

*

He was back.

Lillian Dwyer's heart did a paradiddle when she saw him. Lurking under a cabbage palmetto, assuming he was hidden by the shadows and the thickening fog but giving himself away with that orange glow from his cigarette.

She let the drape fall into place and sank back on the sofa, telling herself to stay calm, to count to ten. There were probably half a dozen explanations why a man too young to be a resident at Twilight would be loitering outside Grace Minetta's vacant trailer. But for the life of her, Lillian could think of only one.

Nobody needed to remind her how many nuts there were roaming around Florida; her late husband had been a devoted Elmore Leonard fan, after all, and she'd read a couple of the books herself, until the violence and the dirty words convinced her to go back to her favorite large-print editions of Dick Francis and Ellis Peters.

The point being, even if it *wasn't* the Machete Murderer out there, it was somebody who didn't belong. And she'd bet dollars to doughnuts he was up to no good.

She took another peek; still there, and staring straight over at her place now, she was sure.

Lillian felt a shudder course through her body. When it passed, she worked her way up from the sofa and laboriously crossed the darkened living room to the phone.

"Like I said, ma'am, there don't seem to be anybody out there now."

"You took a good look around Grace Minetta's old place?"

"Locked up tight, ma'am. I circled the whole property—no sign of nobody I could see."

The fact is, Deputy Proud of the Pinellas County sheriff's department couldn't say for sure it was this Grace Minetta's double-wide he'd checked out, seeing as how Mrs. Dwyer couldn't remember the house number and wasn't even sure herself which trailer was which. But it was the only one of the three she'd pointed him toward that had a *For Sale* sign in the front window and an empty carport. The units on either side both appeared to be occupied; cars in the carports, quiet but for back room light in one and muffled TV sounds from the other. And Proud wasn't about to go knocking on their doors and risk having two more nervous seniors talking his ears off—or worse, handguns being about as popular as football in the Sunshine State.

Ever since the first two mutilated bodies had turned up right there in Pinellas Point the previous month, the town's elderly residents had been autodialing 911 every time a car knocked the lid off a garbage can. He'd heard it was just as bad in neighboring Seminole where victims three and four had been found in successive weeks. Now, with a fifth murder having just been discovered up in Clearwater, Proud could only hope the killer—and the panic—would continue to work their way north, all the way to Tallahassee if there was a God in heaven. This was the second time in three days he'd been called away from his dinner of sausage gravy and biscuits at Bob Evans in order to calm down some jittery old Yankee snowbird.

"You mean you didn't find anything?"

"Not even a warm cigarette butt. Ma'am."

Proud was working hard to maintain what his captain called professional demeanor, but the old lady wasn't helping things with that sour puss of hers. The deputy was only twenty-seven, but he figured he'd seen a lot in five years of patrol duty, and what he knew he'd seen enough of was people who thought the world owed them everything from half-

price movie tickets to free bus fare just because they'd managed to live past sixty. And this one's whiny Northern accent wasn't helping matters any.

"Well—I know what I saw."

Proud doubted it. "The thing is, ma'am, you see anything else, you maybe'd wanna call your own park security first. On account of we're pretty packed up right now, what with everybody spooked over this serial—" He caught himself, remembering the department policy. "—These recent homicides in the area."

"Park security? You mean the manager driving around in a golf cart a couple of times a night? For goodness' sake, he's in bed by ten o'clock. If you ask me, you people . . ."

The deputy went into his defense mode, nodding through a neutral smile as he slowly moved away toward the door. By the time she got around to asking what she paid taxes for, he was down the front steps and backpedaling to his cruiser, thinking if they ever managed to catch this Machete Murderer, justifiable homicide wouldn't be a half-bad plea.

"Why didn't you tell me about this psycho, Mom?"

She shrugged it off. "You know me. I've always been a fatalist about such things—not

that I don't take care to lock my doors and windows when I go to bed. Besides, Sidney, you came down to get away from all that. You just enjoy your week in the sun and let the local police worry about this machete character."

They were seated in the living room, at either end of a plump, upholstered sofa. The room was illuminated only by the television screen, burning like an electronic fireplace in the far corner. A news update had just been broadcast about the so-called Machete Murderer; a non-news update, really, since the pseudo-somber anchorman had basically informed his viewers that there were no new developments in the case.

Sid thought, no wonder they're called teasers.

"I'm not interested in a busman's holiday," he said, "but that doesn't mean I can't check this place over in the morning, make sure the locks all work properly. And you oughtta think about getting a monitored security system installed."

Greta Malek flapped her hand dismissively. "I hear the monthly fee for those things runs higher than the cable bill, and then they're always going off for no reason. Besides, we

have Mr. Perrazo keeping an eye on the park at night—”

“The fat guy who cruises around in the golf cart?”

“He has diabetes.”

Sid started to ask what that had to do with the subject at hand but decided to let it go. Mom was Mom; she'd live her own life, and that's as it should be. Anyway, he figured he knew her real reason for downplaying the crime threat. She was hoping to sell him on the idea of following her lead and resettling in central Florida. Why clutter up the prospectus with talk of serial killers and carjackings and all that?

But he had to give her this much: earlier, when he'd seen the fat guy putt by in the golf cart, Sid's first thought was what lousy security this place has. But his second thought was, jeez, with twelve months a year to work on the old golf game, a fella could probably get down into double digits in no time.

If . . .

He sighed and eased himself up off the sofa, absently patting at the bulge in his shirt pocket.

His mother caught the gesture, too. “Instead of worrying about my well-being,” she said, “you should worry a little more about your own, Mr. Marlboro Man.”

He couldn't argue with her; she had the surgeon general on her side. But he'd been sitting there for nearly an hour, growing more fidgety by the minute and, damn it, he couldn't help himself. He was dying for smoke.

Like a moth to a flame, Lillian Dwyer went back to the front door window.

It had been more than an hour since that smirky young deputy had come by, and Lillian hadn't seen any further sign of the lurker. It was starting to feel like he'd never really been out there at all; just some trick of her imagination and the eerie fog . . .

But it was her bedtime, and if she hoped to sleep a wink she'd need to reassure herself one last time.

“Oh my god.”

Despite the darkness and the enveloping mists and her own limitations, her mind's eye saw all it needed: the shadowy palmetto across the way, the glowing orange ember, and, almost stock-still, the trunk of a maple seemingly grafted to the trunk of the tree.

This time the pounding in her chest was exacerbated by lightheadedness, as if the blood in her brain were swirling away down a drain.

“Oh my God.”

Forgetting to pull back the cafe curtains this time, she backed away from the door, stumbling across the room until somehow her hand found the telephone. She punched in the numbers—nine one one—listened to the electronic bleats and clicks, then the ringing. Once, twice, three times—come on—and finally another click and a voice.

A recorded voice.

Lillian spat out a word she hadn't used in years and slammed down the handset.

If only Ed hadn't gone and died. A tower of strength, her late husband had been, fearing nothing and no one so long as he had his .38 Police Special at hand—

Even as the thought came to her through the veil of her rising panic, Lillian was in motion, caroming through the double-wide like an errant pinball, from nook to drawer to cabinet, swallowing a sob, ready to give up when—*there*—high on a shelf in the dining area's built-in china cabinet, safe from curious grandchildren.

She worked the revolver from its soft cotton sack and, holding it two-handed against her chest like a penitent with a crucifix, willed her bad hip and her trembling heart to carry her back to the front door.

Just in time to see the man-shape come out from its hiding place beside the palm and into the street to merge with the rolling tendrils of fog, silent as a nightmare and coming for her.

Sid used his fingernail to flick away the end of the dying cigarette and, reaching up, tucked the butt into one of the potted plants his mother had hanging below the eave of the carport.

It was a nice night for a stroll, fog or no. Give a man a chance to think.

He stepped into the empty street and hesitated, then angled to the left. Maybe he'd wander over to take a look at the community pool Mom had mentioned—

As he approached the cross street, the ubiquitous quiet of the retirement park was abruptly displaced by the simultaneous sounds of a single gunshot and exploding glass. Reflexively, he dropped to a crouch and tried to determine the source.

Just ahead. Someplace.

He jogged up the street, staying low, clawing for the gun he usually wore at the small of his back even as he realized it wouldn't be there. At the cross street he paused and peered right—a double phalanx of

closely bunched mobile homes marching on as far as he could see—and then left. Only four units to a side down that way before the street dead-ended—

Then Sid spotted him.

Second trailer from the end, curled like a fetus on the bottom step of the small entry stoop. A man, no question. Diamonds of broken glass sparkling on the concrete at his feet and, above him, a jagged hole where the door's upper pane used to be.

Was he wounded? Victim or perp?

Armed and dangerous?

Here and there, porch lights flicked on and front rooms began to light up. Soon the curious would start to poke their heads out, and things would get even more complicated. Sid wished he had his nine with him, wished he had backup, wished he knew what to do . . .

Finally he said the hell with it and let his instincts take over, running directly at the huddled figure on the stoop and shouting in his most commanding voice.

"Police. Stay down, don't move. Police officer."

He was within five feet of the guy—jeans, navy jacket, close-cropped hair—when suddenly the head came around and looked at him, a face both terrified and terrifying, streaked

with blood from a dozen glass cuts.

For one endless moment, they stared at each other—until Sid's eyes caught the glint of the huge stainless steel kitchen knife the guy was hugging.

They moved in the same instant, Sid jumping back as the other man, growling, leaped to his feet, took a feeble swipe with the knife, and tried an end run. Sid shot his foot out sideways, catching the guy on the side of the knee and sending him sprawling onto the pavement. When the bastard rolled over onto his back, grimacing with pain, Sid was standing over him. The knife had landed just out of reach, three feet away.

Sid said, "You're busted, sunshine. Move a muscle and you'll be wearing your ass for shoulder pads."

The prone perp stared up at him, beginning to think; always a dangerous development.

"Hey," he rasped, "if you're a cop, how come you don't have a gun?"

"I'm a pacifist," Sid said, and quickly put him away with a well-placed kick to the side of his head.

Lillian tried to figure out what had happened. She remembered the man-shape com-

ng toward the front steps, how he'd raised the gun, how it seemed to go off all by itself. Realizing how the sudden violent explosion of the window and her own tremors had caused her to lose balance and fall to the carpeted floor.

Still gripping Ed's old Police Special, though—that was something.

Now she rose, first to her knees and, using her left hand on the arm of the sofa to steady herself, back up on rubbery legs.

For a few seconds, she stared at the door's jagged upper pane as if it were a portal of Hell.

Then, because she couldn't think of anything else, she shuffled toward it.

With the adrenaline wearing off, Sid could feel the shakes coming on. He stared down, panning from the wicked kitchen knife to the perp's blood-streaked, supine face.

Jesus. This had to be the nut everybody was looking for. The Machete Murderer.

And you caught him, man. Knocked him colder than . . . colder than last night in Rochester.

Now if you can just manage to hold onto him until—

Far in the distance he heard the joyous wail of a siren.

That's when he allowed himself to relax a fraction, and to think back to the TV news update. Hadn't that blow-dried anchorman said something about a sizable reward on this guy? What—fifty grand? Okay, so the Rochester PD had a policy against its cops accepting rewards, but hey, if he put in his retirement papers, what the hell could they do about it?

A smile began to spread across Sid's face, even as his hand moved absently to the bulge in his shirt pocket.

When Lillian Dwyer peeked out over the edge of the broken window, she couldn't make sense of anything at first. Lights on up and down the street, the gray haze . . .

Was he gone?

She inched her head higher, now able to look down at the area immediately in front of her stoop, and saw—something. Or someone. But was it—

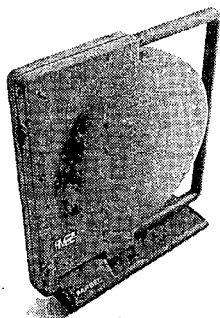
Just then, in the two second flare of a cigarette lighter, she glimpsed the man standing not ten feet away in the street.

"Ohmygod."

Mumbling a Hail Mary, Lillian laid the barrel of the Police Special on the window frame and, taking aim at the glowing orange ember, squeezed off two rounds. ■

MAIL ★ ORDER ★ MALL

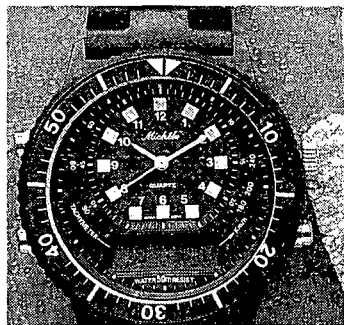
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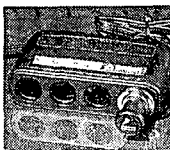
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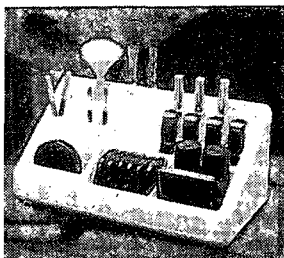


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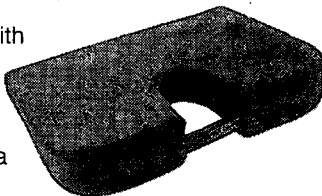


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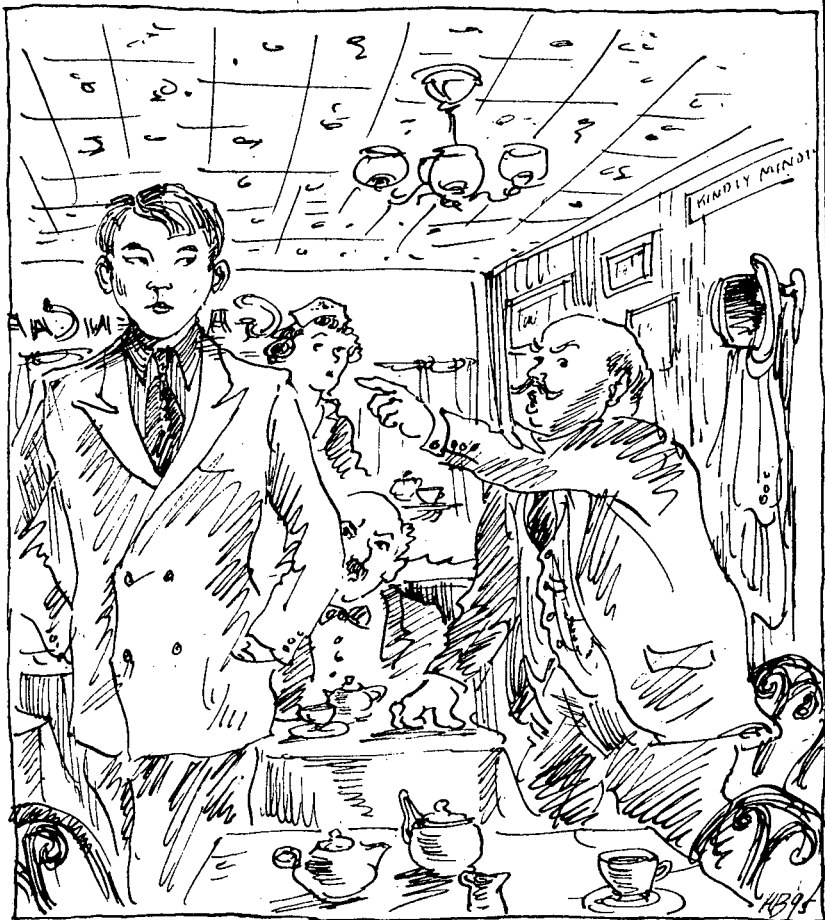


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MYSTERY CLASSIC

A Gentleman Repays a Loan

Keith West



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Illustration by Hank Blauslein

ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Tsim Sek dropped the fifth lump of sugar into his coffee with Oriental precision, stirred it, and resumed his silent, apparently unseeing survey of the Garden Cafe. To look at him, dressed in quiet European clothes, no one would have guessed that, owing to the nonarrival of his credit check from Hong Kong, the young Chinese possessed exactly the fourpence needed to pay for the coffee in front of him, and that so far as ready cash was concerned he was broke. Of course the hotel would let him have credit until the next mail arrived from China, but still, it was awkward.

At the next orange-covered table the only other occupants of the cafe were also drinking their morning coffee, and debating in low but urgent tones. At intervals one of them would produce a small tissue paper packet from one of his waistcoat pockets and open it on the glass-topped table. Then the debate would begin again. Tsim Sek, who had arrived in England only a week ago and had not been in Hatton Garden before, did not know that these were diamond merchants and that the tissue paper packets contained uncut stones—he only knew that these low-voiced men seemed to attach considerable value and importance to the contents of the packets.

The movement of what appeared to be a translucent pebble rolling across the floor of the cafe caught the eye of Tsim Sek, and he followed its course towards his own table. Neither of the disputants seemed to have noticed it, and Tsim Sek, with an almost imperceptible shift of his foot, covered the pebble. . . . The haggling went on. The Chinese leaned down to scratch his ankle, and when he straightened up, the pebble was between his fingers.

He inserted the sugar tongs down the side of the sugar basin, allowed them to spring open, and dropped the stone into the space thus made among the sugar. Then he picked up his coffee cup and drank hurriedly, just as the nearest merchant discovered his loss and rose to his feet in time to see the Chinese rapidly gulp the remainder of his cup of coffee and move his throat convulsively as if swallowing something difficult to swallow.

"My tiamont!" the merchant cried, advancing. "My tiamont!"

"I do not understand you," Tsim Sek replied, rising with dignity.

"My tiamont! I see you swallow eet! I see eet pass down your t'roat! I vill call t'e police! Help! Police! He hass stolen my tiamont!"

Uproar raged around the motionless figure of Tsim Sek. Waitresses appeared; proprietresses emerged from doors marked PRIVATE; onlookers crowded through the street entrance and a constable turned up.

Through it all no one touched Tsim Sek, perhaps because he seemed to have a sort of uncanny dignity as he stood there.

The stout merchant explained to the constable: "As I turn round I see heem svalow eet—hees t'roat steek out, so, ven he svallow. He haf eat my tiamont. Officer, arrest heem!"

Tsim Sek, silent and dignified, was led away.

The police surgeon came out of the X-ray room. "No trace of any diamond anywhere inside him," he told the waiting inspector. "I don't know who made the mistake, but this man hasn't swallowed any diamond. You've searched his clothes?"

"Of course, doctor. Well, I don't know what they'll do about it. Old Guggenheim the diamond merchant it was. Told me he saw him swallow it," said the inspector. "He's waiting downstairs. Lucky you happened to be here, doctor, otherwise we'd have kept him in custody. I don't see how Guggenheim can charge him now."

Down in the charge room the merchant rose to his feet. "You haf found my tiamont?" he cried.

The inspector shook his head. "No. The man didn't swallow it. I'm sorry. Do you still want to charge him?"

"But I saw heem svalow eet!" Guggenheim protested.

Then Tsim Sek raised a hand. "Is it permitted to speak?" he asked.

"Of course you can speak. Do you know what happened to the diamond?" the inspector demanded.

"You English are very courteous to prisoners," he said. "In China I should have been beaten on the soles of my feet with bamboos until I confessed. But you—you just look through me with your wonderful machine, see that there is no diamond anywhere, and then let me go."

Mr. Guggenheim protested: "My tiamont! You talk and talk, but vere ees my tiamont?"

"I do not know where your diamond is," said Tsim Sek. "But I could tell you where to seek it."

"I gif fifty pounds if I find my tiamont!" cried the merchant.

The inspector suggested, "Perhaps he might help us. It's all very irregular. Do you want to charge him, sir?"

"Eet ees no goot!" groaned Mr. Guggenheim. "My tiamont! My tiamont!"

"Then," said the inspector, "we can't help you, Mr. —"

"Tsim Sek," said the Chinese. "No. But I believe that if you arrest me I can demand trial, and I can get money from him for being arrested falsely, can I not?"

"You'd better see a solicitor about that," the inspector told him guardedly.

The Chinese walked up to Mr. Guggenheim. "I sell my brains, like any other man," he said softly. "You have said you will give fifty pounds if you find your diamond. If you will give me the reward, I will tell you where to look."

Mr. Guggenheim brightened up. "He hass hidden eet in t'e cafe; he knows vere eet ees. Come, ve vill search and find my tiamont, and then I will charge heem with stealing eet!" he cried.

Tsim Sek laughed. "If you seek without knowing where to look, you will not find it. If I help you, then you will find it. Remember, it will be in a place where I could not have placed it, so you will not charge me with the theft. You will pay the fifty pounds: the diamond is worth five times that, is it not? Or more? Come, bring your police and search, and you will not find it. Then I will tell you where it must be, and you will find it and pay me the reward." He paused. "Ah, I see that you do not believe me; you think you will find it! Very well, come with me, and you shall search."

He picked up his hat. Mr. Guggenheim and the inspector followed.

Tsim Sek sat watching the efforts of Mr. Guggenheim, the inspector, and the cafe staff to locate the missing stone. Strange, apparently four-legged creatures coursed over the carpet like hounds on a trail.

It was after the luncheon hour, and one waitress, unoccupied in the search, cleared the white cloths from the tables and replaced them with the orange cloths of tea time. Then on each table she set cups, saucers, and sugar basin, which she brought from the kitchen. The inspector and Mr. Guggenheim approached, baffled.

"You have found it?" the Chinese asked.

"No. Ah, my tiamont!" began the merchant's refrain.

"Then you will pay the reward?"

Mr. Guggenheim nodded, loathing the thought.

"Bring all the sugar basins here," Tsim Sek ordered. Soon they stood on the table before him. "You will find your diamond in one of these."

Mr. Guggenheim feverishly emptied basin after basin. At the tenth basin he held up the missing diamond. "Ah, I haf heem!" he proclaimed excitedly.

"How did you know?" the inspector asked Tsim Sek suspiciously.

"Since the diamond was not on the floor, and since it was presumably not in the pocket of you or your friend—" Tsim Sek nodded to Mr. Guggenheim "—it must be on the table at which you were sitting. There is only one hiding place on a table like this. If you had looked in your sugar basin instead of suspecting me, you would have saved fifty pounds." He held out his hand for the money. "My coffee was too hot, and I had difficulty in swallowing it, when you thought I was swallowing your diamond," he smiled.

A fortnight later, when Tsim Sek received the delayed check from Hong Kong, by a curious coincidence the diamond merchant found that someone had credited his account at the bank with fifty pounds, two shillings. The paying slip was signed "Sherlock Holmes," and an observant man would have noticed that the two shillings represented the interest on fifty pounds at approximately five percent for a fortnight. But Mr. Guggenheim did not pursue the matter further because he had no business relations with anyone of the name of Holmes, and knew nothing either of the Chinese sense of humor or of the scrupulous care with which a Chinese repays a loan.

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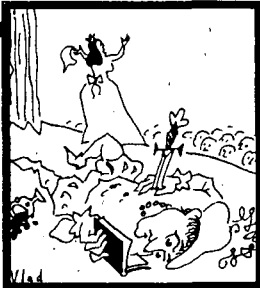
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BOOKED & PRINTED

by Mary Cannon



Pick up **Designer Crimes** (Simon & Schuster, \$21), the latest in Lia Matera's dark and edgy series featuring San Francisco attorney Laura Di Palma. Laura is being victimized by slanderous "references" given by her former boss to prospective clients. She's in the office of another woman attorney to discuss plans to sue him when a gunman rushes in and blasts away. The woman's dying words—"designer crimes"—lure Laura into an investigation of a daring, lucrative, and highly illegal moonlighting scheme. Meanwhile, Laura agrees to defend a childhood friend accused of murder back in their hometown. Aided by her onetime boyfriend, private detective Sandy Arkelett, Laura must untangle the threads of a complex multiple homicide while facing some unresolved issues in her personal life. Matera builds her novel carefully with a fresh plot, strong characters with complex psyches, and heart-stopping action. Don't miss it.

P. M. Carlson uses the winding landscape of a dark and deadly river as her theme in **Bloodstream** (Pocket, \$20), the second novel to feature Indiana Deputy Sheriff Marty Hopkins. Marty answers a call from a distraught mother whose teenage son didn't come home the night before. She's sympathetic; she's been worrying about her own wandering daughter recently. Apparently fourteen-year-old Johnny Donato was last seen visiting a nearby farm being renovated as an historical working village by a summer camp of rich kids. The effort is the dream of a former city couple who wish to create a self-sufficient community like those of the last century. Backed by a canny local developer, they've made a good start, but the locals are still suspicious and no one wants bad publicity. That's before the boy's body is discovered in the White

River; Marty must learn the river's secrets as well as a killer's agenda. Solidly plotted, with strong and sympathetic characters and a fresh Midwestern scene.

Abigail Padgett's exceptional protagonist, Bo Bradley, is a San Diego child protection caseworker who suffers from manic-depression. Her third outing, **Turtle Bay** (Mysterious Press, \$19.95), opens with the case of a baby boy named Acito who has been hospitalized due to ingestion of a rare poison. Acito's devoted mother, a Mayan working in Tijuana as a nightclub singer, had hired a Latino couple in the States to care for her son; now the court is threatening to remove Acito from her custody. As was true in her first two cases, Bo's struggle with her illness has provided her with intuitive insights, enormous compassion, courage, and a totally individualistic slant on reality. Added to Padgett's knowledge of Mayan ways and culture, the result is a strong novel with complex characters, a sophisticated adult love story, graphic descriptions of locales, and lots of action.

Kay Hooper's **Amanda** (Bantam, \$19.95) will delight fans of Phyllis Whitney and Victoria Holt. For generations the Daulton family have ruled over their Southern home county from their magnificent mansion known as Glory; Jesse, the powerful patriarch, is fighting his battle with cancer as single-mindedly as he's always ruled his businesses and his household; neither his grown daughter nor his two adult grandsons can do other than submit when he welcomes a young stranger home as his long-lost granddaughter Amanda. But our heroine has her own agenda. She's come back to learn the truth about that fateful night twenty years earlier when her mother grabbed her and fled Glory forever—or is there something more on Amanda's mind? It isn't long before the family's bachelor neighbor and lawyer begins haunting her dreams, too. And that's before someone tries to poison her. . . . *Amanda* is as lush and steamy and secretive as the huge grounds of Glory itself.

Food critic Sophie Greenway and her radio personality husband Bram Baldrick debuted in *This Little Piggy Went to Murder*. Ellen Hart brings back this delightful pair in **For Every Evil** (Ballantine, \$5.99), and it's a dilly. The opening of a new show at a chic gallery brings a surprise: Minneapolis' detestable but powerful art critic never makes an appearance. Seems there was an attempt on his life that night that failed. The killer strikes it lucky, however, the second time, and Sophie's college-student son is a suspect. The banter between Sophie and Bram, the developing relationship between Sophie and the estranged son who grew up with his father,

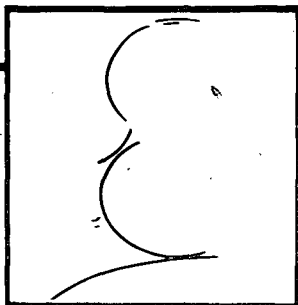
and the insider's peak into the art scene are bonuses added to a fair-play plot and contemporary characters that leap off the page. Stir in Martha Grimes with P. D. James and add a dash of Christie and Amanda Cross and you begin to get the idea: a cosy with a brain.

Marti MacAlister returns in **Done Wrong** by Eleanor Taylor Bland (St. Martin's, \$20.95), another strong entry in this series featuring an African-American heroine. Both Marti and her late husband Johnny were Chicago cops when he was found shot, an apparent suicide. Three years later Marti has moved herself and her two children to a job on a suburban police force when one of Johnny's cop friends dies in a leap from a rooftop. His widow insists that he was no more a suicide than Johnny, and that he had recently heard something about Johnny's death. For three years Marti has refused to look closely at the details surrounding that death. Now she needs to learn the truth before someone silences it forever. Bland deftly weaves together elements of everyday police work, back-room politicking, and homely domestic life into a novel that is both suspenseful and emotionally satisfying.

An Occasional Hell is what life is all about for Ernest DeWait. A private eye for twenty years, DeWait was saved from death after a shooting. But saved for what? His kidney's shot, which means no drinking, no junk food, and no sex. He turned the seething anger he felt during his recovery into a gritty bestseller into which he packed two decades of mean-streets action, but he hasn't written a word since. Randall Silvis opens his tale in a sleepy college town where DeWait teaches literature at a college and lives a mostly solitary existence. When another professor and his young girlfriend are brutally murdered, the dead man's wife appeals to DeWait, the once-famous private eye: please help her prove her innocence. DeWait is so believable it hurts, and one can't help but cheer him on regardless of what it costs him. You won't put this book down until the surprising ending. (Ballantine, \$5.99)

MURDER BY DIRECTION

by William Heller



The Glass Shield begins with a series of colorful big-screen enlargements from a comic strip that follows the heroic adventures of a young black cop. "You've proved yourself," says a veteran officer in the final panel. "Your shield is made of gold." And all the cartoon officers have smiles on their faces.

Real life, as rookie cop J. J. Johnson (Michael Boatman) discovers, is nothing like the comics.

Johnson has wanted to be a cop since he was a child, and now that he's a graduate of the Sheriff's Academy, his dream is about to come true. The trouble is, Johnson's dream becomes his worst nightmare.

The gung ho rookie is assigned to a backwards L. A. County sheriff's station where he is the first African-American officer they've seen.

The other men do little to his phony story about the ar-

make Johnson feel welcome, so the young cop goes along with his fellow officers in mistreating the lone female cop at the station—Deputy Deborah Fields (Lori Petty)—joining in their crude remarks and unprofessional attitude. J. J. wants to fit in and will do almost anything to earn their loyalty.

Still, because they're both minorities (the woman officer is also a Jew), Fields senses she and Johnson have a lot in common and will become friends and allies. Of course she's right. And boy, do they ever need each other as the nefarious goings-on at the station house begin slowly to unravel.

J. J. is so intent on becoming part of the cop culture that he agrees to lie, on the witness stand, so an arrest will stand up in court. "I got no sympathy for lowlife scum," he tells his partner in agreeing to back up his phony story about the ar-

rest of Teddy Woods (Ice Cube).

Johnson and his partner had pulled Woods over for no apparent reason and wound up charging him with murder. But when it becomes clear they had no probable cause to pull him over, they concoct a traffic violation.

Woods is accused of murdering the wife of Mr. Greenspan (Elliot Gould), a prominent white man in the community, during a carside robbery attempt. Despite contradictory physical evidence, Greenspan says Woods is the gunman. The cops even have the murder weapon, found in Woods' possession. Or do they?

After discovering a discrepancy in some routine paperwork, J. J. finally begins to see that all is not kosher at his office and that Teddy Woods, as obnoxious as he is, still may not be a killer. He confides his discovery to Fields, and with some legwork and a fed-up veteran officer to supply leads, a larger story of official corruption begins to unfold.

While the web of corruption becomes confusing and causes the movie to drag at times, suspense remains over the fates of Woods and of officers Johnson and Fields. Since their fellow officers are wise to the pair's snooping, the two are forced to watch their backs on and off the job. As cops, they naturally

have to look out for those on the other side of the law, but it becomes clear that their fellow lawmen operate on both sides.

As J. J., Michael Boatman convincingly makes the metamorphosis from naive, wide-eyed, freshly minted cop to justifiably nervous, angry, and disillusioned lawman. At first he tries to use humor to diffuse a difficult situation, smiling no matter what, just like the comic strip officers at the start of the movie. But after he gets a real-life lesson in what's what, he shouts and fights back.

Ice Cube shows he's a talented actor in his role as accused killer Teddy Woods; he's sassy, surly, and savvy. Lori Petty, seen starring opposite a whale in *Free Willy*, proves she can act with people as well.

This provocative film from writer-director Charles Burnett is made all the more compelling by the fact that its subject matter comes straight from today's headlines. And even though *The Glass Shield* is a cop movie, it's not a typical shoot-'em-up flick; there's scarcely a car chase in it. To Burnett's credit, he's created a thinking person's drama in which it's not special effects, explosives, and car wrecks that leave a lasting impression, but several well-developed characters and a thought-provoking story.

THE STORY THAT WON



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Marie, Ontario, Canada; and Thomas C. Martin of Sarasota, Florida.

graph contest was won by Art
Honorable mentions go to
California; John Jeffrey of
Bodenschatz of Copiague,
Findlay, Ohio; Tina Sziriski
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A SORRY TALE by Art Cosing

Sam Sorry, the television store owner, was unhappy. "Let me guess," he said to the unsmiling man holding the box. "I know what you're getting ready to say. Everyone new to the neighborhood comes in here with the same lame jokes: you're going to say something smart about my name, ain't ya?"

The unsmiling man placed the box on the counter. "No, I wasn't," he said.

"Come on," Sam said. "Don't kid me. You're just dying to make a funny about the signs out front: 'SORRY OPEN,' 'Sorry Sales and Service,' 'SORRY BARGAINS EVERY DAY,' '10,000 Sorry Customers and Counting,' 'BUY A SORRY TV TODAY,' 'With A Name Like SORRY It's Got To Be Good.' Let's hear it. You know you want to."

The unsmiling man with the box shook his head.

"All first-time customers do it," Sam said. "Take your best shot. Say something funny. Say something I ain't heard before a million times."

"You're under arrest," the man said. "I'm Detective Browder of the WAPD, and I'm arresting you for the murder of your wife. This box contains what's left of the TV you wired to explode during Oprah. Your wife's dead, all right, but your fingerprints are all over the parts."

Sam bit his lip. "I'm not talking without my lawyer."

"A wise decision," Detective Browder said. "Better safe than sorry." And he smiled for the first time.

William F. Smith, Garden Grove, Cal.

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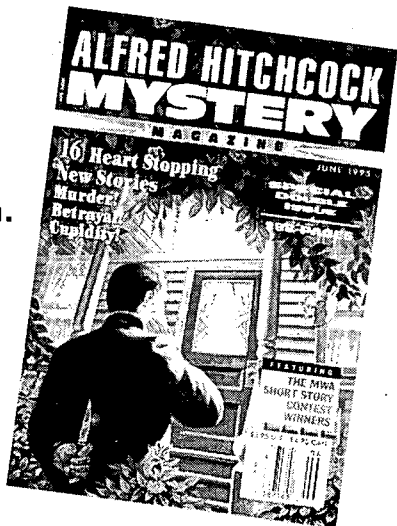
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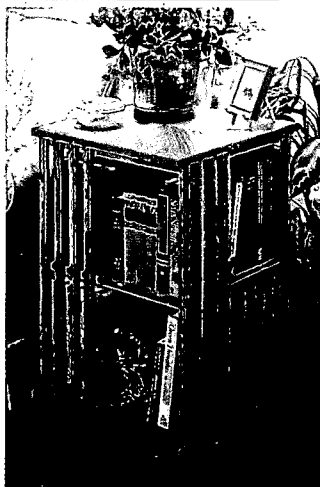
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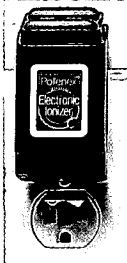
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trillions of negatively charged ions that act like magnets, attracting microscopic particles of dust, smoke and pollen. One belongs in every room, but sometimes a tabletop ionizer just isn't practical or desirable for reasons of space or your decor. This tiny unit (1 1/2"x3") provides an ingenious solution, plugging right into any wall outlet, where it will remain inconspicuous while performing its mighty task. Features "on" indicator light and collector pad that can be rinsed and, eventually, replaced. By Pollenex, for fresher air in home or office. **\$39.98** (\$4.95) #A1867. 2 for **\$75.98** (7.95) #A1867/2.

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